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VIRGINITY BETWEEN FACT AND MEANING

*Johann G. Roten, S.M.**

Looking back on half a century of exploring and debating the dogma of Mary's virginity leaves the observer and reporter with a sense of déjà-vu and no little frustration. The frustration is associated with what Fr. Courth called a theological "Dauerthema"¹—a question without end where the same issues are scrutinized and reshuffled, packaged and repackaged *ad nauseam* without any real doctrinal progress.

But is there need and room for progress? Progress may be seen in the re-awakened curiosity about Mary's virginity followed by the not-so-naïve question: "So what exactly is a virgin? My son asked oh-so-casually."² Indeed, much of contemporary Marian theology concentrates on retrieval efforts, a laudable effort to bring back into focus the perennial teaching of the Church, and so to exorcise oblivion a different form of progress may be seen in the Postmodern irenism of philosophy and theology, and its consequences. The mariological discourse is here vetted to decodifying theological language, communication instead of mere transmission, to Vattimo's "pensiero debole" and its cultural malleability and flexibility. Mary's virginity is seen as object of *Vernetztes Denken* (networked

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¹ E. Courth, "Jungfrauengeburt—ein theologisches Dauerthema," in *Was willst du von mir, Frau? Maria in heutiger Sicht*, ed. J. Pfammatter (Freiburg: Paulusverlag, 1995), 43-65.

² Article by Peter Stanford, *The Tablet* (20/27 December 2008): 26.

thinking), taking into consideration "all the friends it can get," honoring all schools of thought and walks of life.³

I. A TIME OF PROLIFERATION

Reflection about the theological statement regarding Mary's virginity oscillates between these two extremes of an interpretative parameter, between the re-affirmation of dogmatic irreversibility and the difficult summation of attempts to garner meaning from a variety of sources, methods, and vested interests. And, of course, a parameter allows for many in-between versions of the same topic. The following pages report on some of the more visible attempts to assess and promote reflection about the virginal nature of Mary's person and mission in recent decades. The method applied takes stock of representative contributions (quantitative analysis) with the intent to offer a modest qualitative analysis.

The 60s and 70s of last century gave us the buzzword of revision or new interpretation of dogmas.⁴ Discussions stressed not only a new self-understanding of theology asking for more breathing space between dogma and Scripture, but they also dealt with the difficult distinction between fact and meaning—a balancing act that pledged interpretation not elimination of Mary's virginity, but was easily unsettled by the hermeneutical question and the challenges of comparative religion. Not few of the efforts made at revision ended in the twilight zone of myth and symbol. A complete history of this question will have to retrace one day the evolution of two schools of thought

³ See: José Cristo García de Paredes, "Mariologia in Cammino: prospettive mariologiche all'inizio del secolo XXI," *Marianum* 63 (2001): 278 ff.; Gilles Routhier, "Quarante ans après Vatican II: qu'est-ce qu'est devenu le Mouvement marial?" *Istina* 50 (2005): 336; *Religion* (trans. of *La religion. Séminaire de Capri*), ed. J. Derrida and G. Vattimo (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); Michel Foucault, "Deconstruction categorically asserts the absolute impossibility of attributing to any text one single ultimate meaning," in *The Archeology of Knowledge* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1972), 191.

⁴ See *Jungfrauengeburt gestern und heute* [Mariologische Studien, 4: the German Mariological Society] (Essen: Driewer, 1969), 205-213; R. Laurentin, "'Conçu de la Vierge Marie'... à l'heure des révisions dogmatiques," *Études Mariales. Bulletin de la Société Française d'Études Mariales* [hereafter SFEM] 38 (1981): 36 ff.

represented by, respectively, Raymond Brown and René Laurentin. Two giants in their field, they both were tempted by the lure of a certain Positivism of method: R. Brown by a stringent application of historical-critical exegesis; R. Laurentin by a growing identification of dogma and Scripture, and this in spite of his initial and pioneering overture to an accurate scriptural assessment of Mary's virginity.

In 1960, Laurentin published *Structure de Luc 1-2*, recommended by Brown as a "significant book." The latter in 1973 published a work as programmatic as that of Laurentin, but leaning more towards historical criticism: *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus*. In the course of years, the respective positions became more distinct, firmer and expanded in their range: *The Birth of the Messiah* for Brown (1977); *Les Évangiles de l'enfance* (1982) for Laurentin. During the 1980s both authors made explicit and consolidated the methodological bases for their respective and divergent readings of the birth of Christ: Laurentin by publishing *La Foi et l'Exégèse* (1985), and Brown following with a title of similar emphasis, *Biblical Exegesis and Church Doctrine* (1985). After that the two authors applied themselves to explaining their positions to a wider public. Laurentin wrote a simplified version of the Infancy Gospels (*Les évangiles de Noël*, 1986) and, more recently, *Vie authentique de Jésus Christ* (1986), while Brown explained himself in *Responses to 101 Questions on the Bible* (1990) and indicated his exegetical position in the second edition of *The Birth of the Messiah* (1993). Evidently, the discussion about Mary the Virgin during the years from 1960 to 1993 was not limited to the approaches of just two writers. They are not representative of all that has been said on the question, but the development of their thought is symptomatic of a certain profile of the period.

S. Perrella gave us a detailed description of magisterial pronouncements on the question and commentaries by Latin authors (Italy, Spain, and Latin America) for the period of 1962-1994.⁵ His conclusions attempt to juggle both "felici approfondimenti" and

⁵ S. M. Perrella, "Il parto verginale di Maria nel dibattito teologico contemporaneo (1962-1994). Magistero-Esgesi-Teologia," *Marianum* 56 (1994): 95-213.

"improvvide revisioni" (inconsiderate revisions) deploring, with Ignace de La Potterie, the absence of an indispensable conjunction between critical study and dogmatic proposition.⁶

But how are we to label the recent decades—the period between 1990 and the present? And this even though certain authors think that since the time of St. Jerome, apart from certain subtle points, nothing really new has been said on the subject of Mary's virginity.⁷ B. Sesboué is of the opinion that today there is a certain calming down considering the Christological dimension of the question. In its place, he sees the question of the perpetual virginity making major headlines.⁸ The problem appears to be more complex. There will always be theologians (in exegesis, Christology, Mariology) who treat the matter *ex professo*. Alas, the theme of Mary's virginity has swarmed. Today we are witnessing an important vulgarization of different aspects of this theological and cultural conglomeration. Less than ever, it is a topic pursued by a few specialists; on the contrary, the subject is commented on and debated in ever-widening (and not necessarily only learned) circles. Let us not forget that Africa and Asia are making their own contribution to the topic. And must we call to mind the different theological sensibilities at the heart of the old Euro-centric church, of Europe and the United States?⁹ For these reasons, and because our theme has evolved in recent decades in the sense of expansion and diversification, we have cast a glance on the different areas, languages and cultures capable of clarifying our understanding of this great figure that is Mary-Virgin.

⁶ Ibid., 210-212. "...l'assenza di indispensabili congiunzioni tra la ricerca critica della fede e la proposizione dogmatica della fede" (212).

⁷ A. Ziegenaus, "Jungfräulichkeit," in *Marienlexikon*, ed. R. Baumer and L. Schefczyk, 6 vols. (St. Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 1988-1994), 3:479.

⁸ The author alludes to several recent works: J. Duquesne, *Jésus* (Paris: Flammarion DDB, 1994) and E. Refoulé, *Les frères et soeurs de Jésus: frères ou cousins?* (Paris: DDB, 1995). See B. Sesboué, "La théologie mariale après Vatican II," in *Théologie, bistrot et piété mariale. Actes du Colloque Université Catholique de Lyon, 1-3 octobre 1996*, ed. J. Comby (Lyon: Profac, 1997), 63-76.

⁹ F. Courth raises the question of the exegetical differences between Latin countries and German or English ones and asks *why?* (Courth, "Jungfrauengeburt—ein theologisches Dauerthema," 68, n. 66).

In the literature here examined we distinguish between the theological and exegetical monographs which treat the subject specifically and exclusively; the treatises in Mariology, where the aspects of virginity are treated inclusively (that is, along with other themes); the commentaries on the Infancy Gospels and the treatises in Christology. There is also the vast domain, ill-defined indeed, which speaks of virginity in general terms—or in particular of Mary's virginity—in the context of the history of religions, and of literature and cultural anthropology. So we have been able to gather for our period more than 300 titles. Not all these titles are of equal importance, but the number indicates that the question of Mary's virginity with respect to its various aspects and facets remains of interest. In particular, the literature draws attention to what is not specifically Marian, inspired among others by studies of feminine theology and a renewal of interest in cultural anthropology.¹⁰ Thanks to a sustained interest in the Gospel of Luke, the exegetical discourse about Mary's virginity is expanding at a time when Christology and Mariology are showing a moderate interest in this issue.

II. MAGISTERIAL CATECHESIS

The Incarnation is one of the touchstones of our faith: it is a rule of faith and, at the same time a reason for our hope and an unfailing source of love. The virginal conception is an indispensable element in the mystery of the Incarnation. In its wisdom, inspired by the Holy Spirit, the Church has closely linked the conception with the virginal birth and also with the perpetual virginity of Mary. Mary-Virgin is the concomitant rule of faith in the Incarnation (*lex credendi*). She also represents for us a sure approach to the contemplation of this mystery (*lex orandi*).

The Magisterium, guardian and teacher of faith, addressed the issue of Mary's virginity repeatedly, sometimes pointedly, sometimes in a more anecdotal way. If Paul VI's *Signum Magnum*¹¹

¹⁰ Because the reproduction of this entire bibliography would go beyond the limits of our account, we have selected the most important contributions dealing with the developments being considered.

¹¹ *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* (hereafter AAS) 59 (1967): 469 ff.

and *Professio Fidei*¹² were dams erected to prevent dissolution of the teaching, especially that of Mary's perpetual virginity. Benedict XVI's references to virginity have more figurative and anecdotal character. They highlight the aesthetic quality ("mirror of the infinite beauty") and the model character of her person ("pure reflection of the light of Christ."¹³ In sum, the Church's teaching navigates between exhortation and explanation, with emphasis on the former.

A. Exhortation and Explanation

The Church's magisterium forewarns and also puts persons in their place. It has done this several times, among others that was the case of Scheifler (1978), McBrien (1980, 1994/5), Ranke-Heinemann (1990) and, more recently, Balasuriya (1996) and Jon Sobrino (2006). But that is not its principal function. During recent decades, we have seen the publication of numerous documents that can be of interest for our subject.¹⁴ The chief observation to be made here is that the texts that mention one or more aspects of the virginity of Mary are above all of an indicative character. They affirm the doctrine, but in general they do not elaborate, and they explain little. However, in *Redemptoris Mater*¹⁵ there is allusion to the union between virginity and maternity¹⁶ and the preservation of the virginity intact.¹⁷ In several cases, there is reference made to the happy and suggestive formulation of *Lumen Gentium* 57 and its contribution to a more adequate illustration of Mary's virginal conception.¹⁸ The

¹² AAS 60 (1968): 433-435.

¹³ J. Roten, "Mary—"Personal Concretization of the Church," *Marian Studies* 57 (2006): 315.

¹⁴ From *Dominum et Vivificantem* (DV), on the Holy Spirit in the Church and the world (AAS 78 [1986]: 809-900) to *Vita Consecrata* (VC), an exhortation on the consecrated life (AAS 88 [1996]: 377-486) and *The Trinity's Embrace—God's Saving Plan: A Catechesis on Salvation History* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2002), 62-63, these were mainly occasional teachings by Pope John Paul II.

¹⁵ There are 4 references. See *Redemptoris Mater* (RM), arts. 20, 30, 31 and 39.

¹⁶ RM 39. See also DV 18; MD (*Mulieris Dignitatem*) 17.

¹⁷ RM 20.

¹⁸ Cf., e.g., *The Virgin Mary in Intellectual and Spiritual Formation*, letter from the Congregation for Catholic Education (Rome, 1988), 7 and 12.

Ever-Virgin is mentioned several times in *Mulieris Dignitatem*.¹⁹ *Vita Consecrata* underlines in particular the virginal love as a source of special fecundity.²⁰ The virginal vocation is presented as a model for women because it illustrates the ideal of total consecration of the person to God.²¹

John Paul II's seventy Marian catecheses can be subdivided in three series: (1) Nine lessons on Mary's presence in the history of the Church (September 6–December 22, 1995); (2) An impressive number of 46 teachings on the Church's faith regarding Mary (January 3, 1996–July 13, 1997), and (3) a series of 14 catecheses on Mary's role in the Church. Among them we are able to pinpoint six general audiences devoted to the theme of virginity. The series begins with the bold statement, "The virginal conception is a biological fact" (July 10, 1996), affirms that "Our Lady intended to remain Virgin" (July 24, 1996), points out the profound relationship between Mary's virginity and the Incarnation in "The Eternal Son of God is also born of Mary" (July 31, 1996), shows how "Mary's Choice" inspires consecrated virginity (August 31, 1996), and presents the marriage of the holy couple as lived virginity: "Mary and Joseph lived the gift of virginity" (August 21, 1996). The catechesis on virginity ends with "The Church presents Mary as Ever-Virgin" (August 28, 1996). According to John Paul II the affirmation of the virgin birth (virginity before giving birth) is "undoubtedly the most important" because it "directly touches the mystery of the Incarnation."²² Treading lightly when dealing with the virginity *in partu*, the pope makes reference to Pope Hormisdas' formulation that the Son of God opening his mother's womb in birth was "'not dissolving his mother's virginity' (DS 368)." This formulation is reflected in *Lumen Gentium* 57, stating that Jesus Christ "did not diminish

¹⁹ MD 3, 17, 20.

²⁰ VC 34, 112.

²¹ MD 20.

²² See: John Paul II, *Theotokos: Woman, Mother, Disciple: A Catechesis on Mary: Mother of God*, With a Foreword by Eamon R. Carroll, O.Carm (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2000), 131. Of lesser importance for our theme are John Paul II's catechesis on the Creed: *Jesus, Son, and Savior: A Catechesis on the Creed* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1996).

his mother's virginal integrity but sanctified it" (LG 57). Coming as somewhat of a surprise is John Paul's mention of Mary's *votum virginitatis* called choice and ideal of virginity. Given the pastoral context, Mary's commitment to virginity is used to encourage virginal consecration among women, highlighting also the gift of virginity lived by Joseph and Mary in their married life.

It is evidently in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) that we find the most complete information on the topic of virginity.²³ The *Catechism* takes great care to present and to justify the Church's doctrine of the three aspects of Mary's virginity. It takes into account the objections raised on the subject of virginity and answers them in part. In short, the meaning of this teaching is accessible only in faith that should read it within the *nexus mysteriorum* of all the mysteries of Christ. The CCC offers five theological reasons²⁴ for a better understanding of Mary's virginal maternity. It makes us perceive 1) the absolute initiative of God; 2) the beginning of a new creation through the new Adam; 3) a new way for a new birth²⁵; 4) Mary's virginity as a sign of faith and a unique and undivided gift to the divine will; 5) that Mary, as Virgin and Mother, is the symbol and the perfect realization of the Church. The recent *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Washington: USCCB, 2006) reverts to the traditional question and answer style²⁶ thus simplifying the access but abandoning at the same time the doctrinal and motivational riches of its parent version.

Articles 496-501 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*²⁷ present in a concise way the principal lines of the doctrine and endeavor to give simple answers to objections such as the silence of Mark and John, the legendary character of the virginal

²³ CCC, arts. 496-507.

²⁴ Cf. CCC, arts. 503-507.

²⁵ By referring to John 1:13, the catechism presents Jesus as the author of this new birth that does not depend on the blood and will of man! This life is virginal because it is the gift of the Spirit to mankind.

²⁶ See CompendCCC, Part One: The Profession of Faith, arts. 93-103.

²⁷ Cf. CCC, arts. 496-501.

conception, and the question of the brothers and sisters of Jesus. We seem to perceive in these texts a slight apologetic accent, which is nevertheless compensated in large part by the theological care and the spiritual tone of the exposition, for example, when it states that Jesus is the only son of Mary, but that her spiritual maternity extends to all of humanity.²⁸ The explanations of the CCC do not seem to be affiliated to any special school of theology or exegesis. The document of the Swiss bishops speaks of Mary's virginity in a similar way, all the while being more concerned with contemporary theology and exegesis.²⁹ In the pastoral letter *Behold Your Mother—Woman of Faith* by the US National Conference of Catholic Bishops (November 21, 1973) the theme is treated in more narrative form highlighting the progressive emergence of the doctrine on the virginal conception (41-48) and perpetual virginity (49-50), and the rational underpinning of the doctrinal statements.

From a theological viewpoint, John Paul II's most important statement is his Capua address, where, speaking to theologians, the pope points out three directions for the study of Mary's virginity.³⁰ He stresses the following:

1—a theological hermeneutic centered on the “mistero fontale di Cristo-Dio” and therefore the subordination of the Marian question to the ecclesial *paradosis* and its centering on the Christological aspect.

²⁸ Cf. art. 501, which takes up LG 63.

²⁹ *Maria. Kleine Marienkunde. Schweizerische Bischofskonferenz*, 1987. This pastoral letter, steeped in post-conciliar Mariology, was drawn up by G. Holzherr, abbot of Einsiedeln. In its third part, it treats the question of the virginal birth and underlines the following points: understanding beginning with the resurrection; the family circle of Jesus and Mary as a source of information on the virginal conception and birth; the community of Matthew establishing a link with Isaiah 7:14, the primary Christological significance; virginity as a vocational and not as an ascetical meaning; *Virginitas carnis* in view of the reign of God, absence of any devaluing of sex.

³⁰ Cf. S.S. Giovanni Paolo II, “Discorso conclusivo, in *XVI Centenario del Concilio di Capua, 392-1992. Atti del Convegno Internazionale di studi Mariologici, Capua, 19-24 Maggio 1992* (2 vols., Roma, 1993), 1:637-647. This source will hereafter be referred to as *Atti di Capua* (1992).

2—a theological method that endeavors to maintain the indispensable equilibrium between the affirmation of a fact and the illustration of its significance, which studies the connection between the generating of Christ and his Resurrection, considers the mystery of the Incarnation from within its parameter as a gift of God and the human response thereto, and shows this in an organic way. To do this, one must take account of ecclesial tradition, of Scripture, and of intertestamental literature and of present-day culture.

3—a theological ethic marked by respect when confronting the mystery of God, eager to present the entire message and characterized by critical rigor and intellectual honesty devoid of exaggerations and distortions.

In sum, the voice of the magisterium during this period is one of recall and affirmation above all else. It became and is a mouthpiece of the Council by using its language. But there is also the invitation—as mentioned above—to resume theological reflection on the theme of virginity considered in the aggregate to be situated within the hermeneutic context of the “mystery-event of Christ.”

B. Liturgical Impetus

If the developments of the magisterium on the conception and birth of Jesus and the virginity of Mary limit themselves above all to expository statements, this is not the case for the liturgy. In the liturgy we find a truly therapeutic language that holds to the paradox of Mary's virginity all the while turning our gaze towards a truth that is beyond. It also promotes adhesion of the heart.

C. Maggioni underlines the sobriety and the vigor of the liturgical texts that present the virginity to us as an integral part of the mystery of the God-Savior.⁵¹ He further emphasizes the happy consonance between the faith that is celebrated and the faith that is professed. He calls attention to the descriptive quality of the liturgical texts that lead us to contemplation of the wonderful birth of the God-Man and the incorruptible

⁵¹ “‘Intemerata virginitas edidit Salvatorem’ [a virginity inviolate brought forth the Savior]: La verginità di Maria nel *Missale Romanum*,” *Marianum* 55 (1993): 99-181.

virginity of Mary. She is the one whom the liturgy celebrates as Ever-Virgin (LG 52). We find an echo to Maggioni's liturgical references to Mary's virginity in P. Johannes Nebel.³² The author offers the reader a comprehensive presentation of non-biblical texts of the Marian mass texts and the Prayer of the Church.

Similar remarks apply to the most important document of Marian liturgy that appeared in this period, that is, the Masses in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary.³³ We are able to point out some twenty prefaces that speak of the virginal conception and birth and of the perpetual virginity of Mary. These are texts that are more vivid than instructive, indicating the paradox of the event: the one who did not know man and remained a virgin (P4).³⁴ Mary's virginity is described in greatly varied ways: as the purest love (P2), as the secret shrine of her virginal womb (P5); through the Incarnation, Mary becomes the House of Gold, the Royal Palace, the Holy City, the Ark of the New Covenant (P23). The virginal conception is described as the action of Wisdom that establishes its dwelling in the chaste womb of Mary (P24). A connection is made between virginity and the purity of faith, between virginity and listening, between virginity and the joyful embracing of the Word (P26) and purity of heart (P25). At the same time, virginity is presented as a stage to be surpassed: Mary is indeed blessed because she received the Son in her virginal womb, but she is even more blessed because she is a disciple of the Word Incarnate. We can sum up this rich imagery with the following expression: "The Mother of God is a shrine."³⁵

H. Stirnimann calls attention to the liturgical origin of the triadic formula of faith in Mary's virginity.³⁶ We have here a

³² "Der Preis der Jungfrau in der aktuellen römischen Liturgie," in *Geboren aus der Jungfrau Maria: Klarstellungen*, ed. A. Ziegenaus, Mariologische Studien 19 (Regensburg: F. Pustet, 2007), 191-251.

³³ *Collection of Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (New York: Catholic Book Pub. Co., 1988) (*Collectio Missarum de Beata Maria Virgine*, Roma 1986).

³⁴ Letter and number correspond to the prefaces of the different Masses in the collection referred to above.

³⁵ J. Seward, *Redeemer in the Womb* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993), 47.

³⁶ H. Stirnimann, *Marjam: Marienrede an einer Wende* (Freiburg, Switzerland: Universitätsverlag Freiburg, 1989), 237.

doxological formula, that is, an expression of joyous praise and not a report from a laboratory.

III. PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS

An examination of recent literature on the virginity—the virginal conception and birth, but even more on the perpetual virginity—shows that the problems encountered in exegesis and theology often have a philosophical basis. All of us carry about or are innocent victims of a certain pre-comprehension or preconception, sometimes unknowingly due to our cultural genes, sometimes due to a deliberate choice of some vested interest or method. This incontrovertible fact has been and is articulated in various ways. Salient among these ways are the following:

A. Strauss's *Redivivus*?

Several authors agree that the difficulties with virginity began with *The Life of Jesus* by D. F. Strauss (1835 and 1864) and the dichotomy of his Christology into history vs. myth. If the historical part remains residual, an abundant harvest of mythic accounts designated as such is offered by Strauss—among others the so-called myths dealing with the birth of Jesus. It is this dichotomy, founded on a mechanistic and deistic view of the world, that has marked the discussion of the virginal conception ever since.³⁷ At its center, is the denial of the miraculous, considered incompatible with a strict separation between primary and secondary causes of and in creation.³⁸ But is the shadow of Strauss still looming? Is there reason to speak of Strauss's *Redivivus*? According to certain authors, the Straussian worldview is of the past and has been overcome, not only from a philosophical point of view but from a scientific one as well.³⁹ To refuse the

³⁷ J. C. R. García Paredes, *Mariología* (Madrid: BAC, 1995), 316, 325.

³⁸ Ziegenaus, *Marienlexikon*, 3:477-478.

³⁹ See D. Hattrup, "Neues von der Jungfrauengeburt," *Theologie und Glaube* 82 (1992): 249-255. G. L. Müller, *Was heisst: Geboren von der Jungfrau Maria? Eine theologische Deutung*, Quaestiones disputatae 199 (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1989), 14-23. S. L. Jaki, "The Virgin Birth and the Birth of Science," *The Downside Review* 107 (October 1989): 271 ff. Giancarlo Rocca, "La perpetua verginità di Maria nello studio di G. L. Müller, 'Was heisst: Geboren von der Jungfrau Maria?': Osservazioni critiche," *Ephemerides Mariologicae* 52 (2002): 487-490.

idea of the miraculous on principle is not scientific, as R. Brown also concedes.⁴⁰ May we then expect to see “the Virgin” recapture her rights as an antidote à la Henry Adams, against a deist and mechanistic view of the world?⁴¹ Caution is of the order, for what we have here is more than a “gnoseological idealism” (Laurentin) of a few initiates. The shadow of Strauss is still looming! We are dealing still with a cultural mentality connatural to liberal Protestantism, but strongly anchored as well in contemporary Catholic mentality.⁴² The latter may have reached a stage of all-pervasiveness where learned hypothesis has turned into public opinion and thus proof for the many.⁴³

B. Waning *Theologoumenon*

It was Protestant exegesis that created the notion of *theologoumenon*, and Karl Rahner who fixed its significance as theological statement to gather meaning without binding character. However, over time meaning and application travel and evolve.⁴⁴

Ignace de La Potterie discussed the recent history of this term, become surreptitiously a technical term, almost a “slogan with an ideological import” that would state that the virginal conception ought not to be understood in a historical sense but as a symbol of the gift of God.⁴⁵ The history of the *theologoumenon* is a history of *quid pro quo* carrying along

⁴⁰ *The Birth of the Messiah* (NY: Doubleday, 1993), 188: “... for a presupposition that miracles are impossible is unscientific.”

⁴¹ See R. C. Lutz, “Henry Adams: The Virgin’s Spirituality and the Spirit of Electricity” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 1991), viii.

⁴² R. Laurentin, *Vie authentique de Jésus Christ* (2 vols., Paris: Fayard, 1990), 2:58 ff. (Vol. 2: *Fondements, preuves et justifications*).

⁴³ See A. Koschorke, *Die Heilige Familie und ihre Folgen* (2nd ed., Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch, 2000), 29; J. M. Moschetta, *Jésus, Fils de Joseph. Comment comprendre aujourd’hui la conception virginale de Jésus?* Collection “Religion et sciences humaines” (Paris: Harmattan, 2002), 189-207. Here, e.g., “il n’y a pas lieu de maintenir l’historicité de la conception virginale.”

⁴⁴ *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, 9 (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2006), 1462.

⁴⁵ I. de La Potterie, “La concezione verginale di Cristo ‘teologumeno’ o dato storico-salvifico rivelato?” in *Atti di Capua* (1992), 1:182 ff.

in its wake much doubt and confusion! Whatever may be the confusion as to the definition of this term, according to La Potterie, one thing is sure: "Here we are no longer concerned with history but with symbol that seeks to express a profound truth."⁴⁶ To speak of "progressive theologizing" (E. Vallauri) in this context is likewise self-deception, for in fact we have here an attempt to reduce narration to a purely theological statement by removing from it any historical and biological aspect, calling it mythic.⁴⁷ In the 1990s already, the Conference of Bishops of the United States refused to accept the classification of the virginal conception as a *theologoumenon* in a synthesis of the Catholic faith.⁴⁸ In his turn, W. Brennan rejects the term and proposes—not without some risk—to replace it with "creedal datum."⁴⁹ There is an inclination to abandon this compromising term. Recent developments on Mary's virginity show an evident waning in the use of this terminology not least thanks to a more explicit reference to the anthropological foundation of virginity and divine maternity.⁵⁰

C. Inflation of the Historical Argument

Much of the latter part of the twentieth century was marked by a veritable obsession with the historicity or the non-historical character of the Infancy Narratives. The last two decades seem to signal an abatement, indeed a certain indifference, with respect to the historical argument. We find the extreme form of this reaction, for example, in C. Makarian, for whom "all is history, including even a parabolic or imagined representation."⁵¹ There is no question that the importance of history is falling

⁴⁶ J. Duquesne, *Jésus*, 42-43.

⁴⁷ See I. de La Potterie, "La concezione verginale di Cristo," in *Atti di Capua* (1992), 1:175.

⁴⁸ We refer to *Catholicism*, ed. R. P. McBrien (rev. ed., San Francisco: Harper 1994).

⁴⁹ W. Brennan, "The Virginity of Mary in the Theology of the New Creation," *Milltown Studies* 38 (1996): 75-97. The author presents five reasons for opposing the "theologoumenon" (see p. 92).

⁵⁰ See, e.g., Trinidad León Martín, "La 'inclusión' antropológica de los dogmas marianos. Una mirada dentro de nuestro entorno teológico," *Proyección* 49 (2002): 317-318.

⁵¹ Christian Makarian, *Marie* (Paris: Desclée, 1995), 126.

off, and that for a variety of reasons. The devaluation may be due to an instinctive opposition to "historical materialism" (Makarian), the disenchantment with historical-critical exegesis and its meager certitudes, the growing number of different exegetical methods,⁵² the loss of confidence in history as a criterion of truth following upon what some call the "Americanization of information" (multiplication of sources, exponential increase of information, method of argument and counter-argument), but also to the rediscovery of a certain mytho-religiosity.⁵³ There exists among certain exegetes and theologians, the realization that the truth of the infancy accounts cannot be demonstrated by empirical history,⁵⁴ and that the exegete by his historical labors cannot establish any contents of faith binding in conscience.⁵⁵ The relativization of the historical argument is due also to the differences of opinion as to the degree of historicity found or able to be found in the accounts of the birth of Christ.⁵⁶

If faith in a quasi-absolute notion of history and of historicity has lost its apodictic character, we can be and ought to be happy about it, but we must be on our guard against a danger that always threatens a double obsession with history: 1) the obsession of those who know in advance that the historic fact does not exist and who work according to this principle to disqualify history or to prove its non-existence; 2) the obsession of those who seem to know with the same certitude that the historic fact ought to exist and consequently set out to prove it.

⁵² See further on in this paper, under V. Exegetical Considerations, the section on Exegetical Pluralism.

⁵³ See, among others, R. Horsley, *The Liberation of Christmas: The Infancy Narratives in Social Context* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 19. The lack of precision in language when speaking of the Infancy Gospels is typical of the development here described: "history-like narratives," "historical legends," "legendary history."

⁵⁴ P. Grelot, *Combats pour la Bible en Église* (Paris: Cerf, 1994), 227.

⁵⁵ J. Gnllka, *Jesus von Nazareth. Botschaft und Geschichte* (Freiburg: Herder, 1995), 21.

⁵⁶ See the differences between H. Schürmann, R. E. Brown and J. de Freitas Ferreira, pointed out by García Paredes, *Mariologia*, 327-328.

D. Symbol–Antidote and Panacea?

We further note a certain eagerness to make good use of symbolic language, sometimes employed as a weapon against dogmatic formulations.⁵⁷ The symbol serves as an antidote against positivist dogmatism (whether scientific or other!). It can even serve as “one of the essential bases for theological reflection.”⁵⁸ In all these cases, symbols give rise to thought (P. Ricoeur)! “Les symboles donnent à penser”! A well-known expression by Paul Ricoeur inviting a double meaning: symbols not only invite reflection, they also invite caution. For J. Kremer, symbolic language is the only correct way to speak of the virginal birth, because it is the nature of God’s creative action to be incapable of being explained or proved, but only to be confessed through the language of images. Granted, the Infancy Gospels should and must be approached through historical method, but this does not make possible a profound and direct understanding of the original testimonies about the Incarnation.⁵⁹ God intervenes in history through concrete acts; revelation is concealed in these acts: “The same is true for the virginal conception of Jesus, which in a way becomes a significant “symbol” of the mystery.”⁶⁰ The multivalent character of the symbol allows to discover reality not only in its depth but also in its extension.⁶¹ The symbolic valence of Mary-Virgin makes her “Verstehungsprinzip” (a principle of explanation) of the history of salvation, provided that it is subordinated to the Christological symbolism and that it be placed at the point of intersection of faith and grace.⁶²

⁵⁷ Christa Mulack, *Maria, die geheime Göttin des Christentums* (Stuttgart: Kreuz Verlag, 1985 [4th ed., 1991]), pointed out the opposition between dogma and symbol by declaring, “The symbol must remain, for the image has prior rights” (24 ff.).

⁵⁸ P. Grelot, *La condition de la femme d’après le NT* (Paris: Desclée, 1995), 16.

⁵⁹ J. Kremer, “Das Erfassen der bildsprachlichen Dimension als Hilfe für das rechte Verstehen der biblischen ‘Kindheitsevangelien’ und ihre Vermittlung als lebendiges Wort Gottes,” in *Metaphorik und Mythos im Neuen Testament*, ed. K. Kertelge, *Quaestiones disputatae* 126 (Freiburg [im Breisgau]: Herder, 1990), 78–109.

⁶⁰ I. de La Potterie, *Marie dans le mystère de l’Alliance* (Paris: Desclée, 1988), 153, nn. H. Stirnimann, *Marjam*, 241–242.

⁶¹ W. Brennan, “The Virginity of Mary in the Theology of the New Creation,” 76–77.

⁶² W. Beinert, “Die mariologischen Dogmen und ihre Entfaltung,” in *Handbuch der Marienkunde*, ed. W. Beinert and Heinrich Petri (2 vols., Regensburg: E Pustet, 1996), 1:297–298.

Since it is ambivalent, symbolic language easily becomes ambiguous, especially when it suggests a discourse on Mary based on myth.⁶³ There is an important difference between showing Mary as "virgin significante,"⁶⁴ thus introducing the reader into the mystery of her person, and an attempt to absorb her person through myth. Myth is a narrative symbol, the narrative dimension allotting credence to the symbolization intended. In Jungian psychology the event (narrative dimension) is no longer related to Mary's biography but to the history of personal consciousness: "The virginity of Mary means that incarnation is about the conception and birth of higher consciousness . . . Christ is the personification of this and is thus, spiritually, the son of a virgin mother."⁶⁵ Different but no more conclusive is the "Myth of the Nativity" when inspired exclusively, or almost, by parallel stories and prototype characters drawn from Jewish, Persian, Egyptian and Roman sources.⁶⁶

During the period we are considering, we can see three ways of using symbolic language within the limits of the discussion on virginity: 1) There is first of all a reactionary usage that marks the opposition against the historic character of the virginal conception and birth; 2) Another function of symbol aims at a profound understanding of the truth apprehended; it facilitates and makes it possible to move from what is stated to what is really meant. 3) There is also the function derived from the symbol that points towards an enlarged sense of the reality apprehended, as for example when the virginity is seen as *autonomy* or *new creation*. In the first and third instances,

⁶³ See J. Galot, "Marie. Mythe ou mystère?" *Gregorianum* 77/4 (1996): 741-763, especially 759-762. There the author discusses "a program in Mariology under the heading of myth," proposed in *Ephemerides Mariologicae* 45 (1995). For the meaning of myth, see B.T. Viviano, "The Genres of Matthew 1-2: Light from 1 Timothy 1:4," *Revue Biblique* 97/1 (1990): 44 ff.

⁶⁴ See Macario Díez Presa, *María, mujer de ayer y de siempre* (Madrid: Publicaciones Claretianas, 1992), 140 ff.

⁶⁵ D. Richo, *Mary Within: A Jungian Contemplation of Her Titles and Powers* (New York: Crossroads, 2001), 61.

⁶⁶ A. Welburn, *Myth of the Nativity: The Virgin Birth Re-examined* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2006), 159 ff.

theologoumenon and symbol are easily confused. Both the *theologoumenon* and symbol must be tested by criteria of a global hermeneutic.⁶⁷

E. Between Faith and Reason

It is the constant tension between faith and reason that perhaps constitutes the most important philosophical dilemma. Would not the controversies regarding Mary's virginity be above all an illustration of the two well-known maxims: *fides quaerens intellectum* and *intellectus quaerens fidem*? (faith seeking intellect and intellect seeking faith). The legitimacy of the two ways must be recognized, but also the fact that they can be and are sometimes applied unilaterally. A certain reading of texts dealing with the Infancy Gospels can lead one to conclude: "In sum, objective historical criticism of the Infancy Gospels is entirely positive. The art as desperate attacks against their historicity is unbelievably artificial."⁶⁸ Unfortunately, the second part of the statement could be the result of too generous an application of the adage *fides quaerens intellectum*. The danger of a certain kind of faith is to turn into a certitude no longer of faith but of science. Some recent publications, well-intentioned and documented, tend to lean in that direction.⁶⁹ As for the *intellectus quaerens fidem*, it can with seemingly good conscience conclude that the same Infancy Gospels "are not historical in some, or even many details," or better: "There is no official church statement in force that the birth narratives are literally historical."⁷⁰ In this case one must make a special effort to add an act of faith in the virginal

⁶⁷ See A. Amato, "Problemi di ermeneutica e di linguaggio," in *La mariologia nell'organizzazione delle discipline teologiche: collocazione e metodo: Atti dell'80 Simposio Internazionale Mariologico, Roma, 2-4 ottobre 1990*, ed. Elio Peretto (Rome: Marianum, 1990), 419-421.

⁶⁸ R. Laurentin, *Vie authentique de Jésus Christ*, 2:63.

⁶⁹ See A. Calkins, "The Virginal Conception and Birth of Jesus Christ as Received and Handed on by the Catholic Church," in *The Virgin Mary and Theology of the Body*, ed. D. H. Calloway (Stockbridge, MA: Marian Press, 2005), 13-40.

⁷⁰ R. Brown, *Responses to 101 Questions on the Bible* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 76.

conception.⁷¹ In short, both methods present potential shortcomings. There is a way of reading the mystery of the virginity theologically, that is according to *fides quaerens intellectum*, which no longer leaves any place for faith, just as there is a way to read the texts scientifically, one which amounts to burning the bridge that leads to faith. For the sake of both faith and reason, we must give more room to authentic faith.⁷²

IV. THEOLOGICAL VARIATIONS

There is growing unanimity among some theologians to stress the importance of a *theological* reading of Mary's virginity. In a very articulate way, this is the case with W.H. Thompson, who not only postulates a greater unity between exegesis and contemplation, but who also goes so far as to say that the meaning of the Infancy Narratives can be "opened" only to one who approaches them in a spirit of adoration. The experience of adoration allows one to grasp the importance of the principles of dissimilarity (the fathomless mystery of God) and similarity (the manifestation of God's glory for us).⁷³ Elsewhere, Mary is called "the heart of theology," thanks to the *consensus virginis* which makes her the prototype of the relation between finite freedom and infinite freedom.⁷⁴ From a similar vantage point, Mary-Virgin is seen as the woman consecrated by the Holy Spirit, the woman faithful to her calling, the first and perfect disciple and the woman consecrated for mission, in other words, a model for the future of consecrated life.⁷⁵ The same contemplative

⁷¹ Ibid., 90: "Since as a Roman Catholic, I regard my Church's normative teaching based on Scripture to be a special aid in the case where the Scriptures are obscure or nondecisive, I accept the virginal conception."

⁷² See J. Ratzinger, *Natura e compito della teologia. Il teologo nella disputa contemporanea* (Milano: Jaca, 1993); L. U. Dalferth, *Jenseits von Mythos und Logos, Quaestiones disputatae* 142 (Freiburg: Herder, 1993), 6-7.

⁷³ W. M. Thompson, *Christology and Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 134-155.

⁷⁴ C. von Schönborn, "Maria-Herz der Theologie," in *Weisheit Gottes, Weisheit der Welt. Festschrift für Joseph Kardinal Ratzinger zum 60. Geburtstag* (2 vols., St. Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 1987), 1:585-589.

⁷⁵ Cf. Introduction to *Servants of the Magnificat: The Canticle of the Blessed Virgin and Consecrated Life*, 210th General Chapter of the Servite Order (Rome: General Curia OSM, 1996).

reading is perceived in Jon M. Sweeney: "According to the testimony of many virgins through the ages, God becomes more than a source of faith, but also the source of desire and passion that animates all creative activity, replacing the human need for sex."⁷⁶

A. Descending and Ascending

Theological reading cannot be separated from exegesis. In most of the recent manuals of Mariology, we note that ever-greater importance is given to the discussion of exegetical problems. For example, a simple and straightforward manual by Terry McNally, *What Every Catholic Should Know about Mary: Dogmas, Doctrines, and Devotion*,⁷⁷ builds scriptural data skillfully into the overall doctrinal fabric of his presentation on the virginity. In general, there is agreement to recognize the role and the usefulness of historical critical exegesis, but its results and positions are used more generously by German, English and, in part, by Spanish mariologists.⁷⁸ There is also agreement that the historical-critical perspective must be completed by a theological reflection on the meaning and significance of God's salvific action as such.⁷⁹ There are important advocates who stress the intimate connection between critical research and dogmatic reading (I. de La Potterie). Nonetheless, S. Perrella believes it necessary to be on guard against the ever-present danger of a dichotomy between exegesis and dogma.⁸⁰

In fact, it is in the coming together, in the way in which exegesis and dogma come together, that we note an absence of clarity or at any rate some hesitation. F. Courth, following

⁷⁶ Jon M. Sweeney, *Strange Heaven: The Virgin Mary as Woman, Mother, Disciple, and Advocate* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006), 29.

⁷⁷ [S.L.]: XLibris Corp., 2009.

⁷⁸ There is question especially of Brown, Fitzmyer and the ecumenical work *Mary in the New Testament: A Collaborative Assessment by Protestant and Roman Catholic Scholars*, ed. R. Brown et al. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978).

⁷⁹ J. Blank, "Die systematischen Implikationen der historisch-kritischen Methode," *Una Sancta* 44/3 (1989): 186-192. Cf. M. Navarro Puerto, *María, la mujer: Ensayo psicológico-bíblico* (Madrid: Publicaciones Claretianas, 1987), 180: "La cualidad virginal no se puede entender mas que a la luz del Evangelio en su totalidad."

⁸⁰ S. Perrella, "Il parto verginale di Maria nel dibattito teologico," 266.

J. Kremer and G. L. Müller, proposes a double reading, both descending and ascending. The virginal conception is to be read, first of all, as a "Glaubenszeichen" (a sign of faith that cannot be demonstrated historically: descending moment), which must then be examined as to the "historic vestiges" (ascending moment) that it includes.⁸¹ The next step, according to Courth, consists of and leads to a "geistgewirktes Bekenntnis," that is, to a profession of faith under the inspiration of the Spirit, for it is the Spirit who ensures the connection between the descending and the ascending movements.⁸² Courth's proposal, far from denying the rich theological meanings we find in a number of other authors (B. Gherardini, B. Forte, G. L. Müller, I. de La Potterie), brings the debate back to its most fundamental expression: whoever questions the virginal conception also questions the very principle of faith (W. Kasper). With respect to the legitimate tendency to affirm strongly that the virginal conception and birth are before all else a Christological mystery, it is worth recalling that this event is an interpersonal encounter and that it is therefore centered also on the person of Mary.⁸³ Neither one nor the other of these aspects should prove to be an obstacle to probe more deeply also the relation between the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, especially the work of the Spirit in Mary at the time of the Incarnation.⁸⁴

B. Virginity—Richness of Meaning

The theological richness of the Incarnation can further be considered under two aspects: the first, Christological, calls attention to the free and salvific plan and will of the Triune God, the absolute transcendence of the Word-Redeemer, the

⁸¹ Courth mentions two of them: Mary's preeminence with respect to Joseph, and the difference between Luke and Matthew. (See n. 82 below.)

⁸² Courth, "Jungfrauengeburt-ein theologisches Dauerthema," 50-60.

⁸³ Cf. K. Stock, "Von Gott berufen, von den Menschen seliggepreisen. Die Gestalt Marias in Lukas 1, 26-56," *Geist und Leben* 64 (1991): 52-63; Stirnimann, *Marjam*, 260.

⁸⁴ Cf. C. I. González, *María, Evangelizada y Evangelizadora*, Teología para la evangelización liberadora en América Latina IV-2 (Bogotá: Celam, 1988), 277-286, which is based on Manteau-Bonamy, "María y el Espíritu Santo en el Concilio Vaticano II," *Estudios Trinitarios* 19 (1985): 377-397; A. Ziegenaus, "Der heilige Geist: Erzeuger Jesus?" *Forum Katholische Theologie* 3 (1988): 226-232.

Incarnation of the Man-God as a sign of God's gratuity (engendered by God without the will of man), Christ, the new man (analogous to the first Adam), formed within the "virgin earth" of Mary of Nazareth. The second aspect and its richness of meaning concerns Mary: "spouse, mother and virgin in the mystery of the covenant."⁸⁵ The Virgin Mary should be contemplated in light of the Incarnation, an event both real and symbolic, that establishes the basis for her total and perpetual virginity (heart and body), and in fact makes it the archetype of Christian life (interior liberty, gift of self, respect for others, the eschatological meaning of life).⁸⁶ These Marian theological meanings are surely legitimate. Nevertheless we must guard against a surcharge of derived symbolizations, especially when they suggest a causal link, for example, between Mary's bodily virginity and the moral conduct of the Christian. The literature we have examined sets forth three worthwhile theological variations and expansions on Mary's virginity:

(1) Several theologians point to the connection between Mary's virginity and the new creation. "With Mary there arises a new genesis, a new world."⁸⁷ James T. O'Connor confirms this idea and adds that Mary's virginity has an anticipatory value, allowing us to foresee at the present time what the transformed and restored universe will be in the eschaton.⁸⁸ O'Connor attributes to the virginity a value that is above all else eschatological, while W. Brennan sees in it the beginning of the new order in the present. The Blessed Virgin is the one who gives her yes to the new creation and so becomes a new creature and a new image of God. This new order comes about thanks to the *Suffering Servant* of whom Mary is herself the faithful servant.⁸⁹ At one with this

⁸⁵ I. de La Potterie, "La concezione verginale di Cristo," in *Atti di Capua* (1992), 1:194-197.

⁸⁶ Cf. among others, S. Perrella, "Il parto verginale di Maria nel dibattito teologico," 210-212.

⁸⁷ García Paredes, *Mariología*, 338.

⁸⁸ J. T. O'Connor, "Ambrose and Karl Rahner: Reflections on the 'Virginitas in partu,'" in *Mater Fidei et Fidelium* [Festschrift for Théodore Kochler], *MLS* 17-23 (1991): 732.

⁸⁹ W. Brennan, "The Virginity of Mary in the Theology of the New Creation," 88-89.

same perspective is H. U. von Balthasar, for whom virginity (that of Mary, but not exclusively) gives the key to enter into that "age, which is the last of the ages." The couple Mary-Joseph refer to the past, to close it off, whereas the couple Mary-John point to the future. In both cases, fecundity goes beyond the sexual sphere: in the first instance as a going beyond human generation, and in the second as a way of life that is radically new and permanent.⁹⁰ Virginity and the renewal of creation sometimes combine Patristic symbolism and feminine theology. Mary's virginal maternal body symbolizes the "virgin soil of paradise." She represents the restoration of the whole natural world "to its original state of goodness." She is "nature prior to human cultivation (and implicitly to male cultivation . . . for it is . . . the male agent that is excluded in the annunciation)."⁹¹

(2) Mary's virginity, in particular her perpetual virginity, refers not only to Christ, but also presents a very powerful ecclesial symbolism. Mary represents the entire Church which attains its maximum of spiritual effectiveness when it gives place completely to the action of God. Mary, through her existential status as virgin, refers to Jesus and his work, incarnate in the Church.⁹² As mirror of the Church, Mary is, according to the views of J. Ratzinger, "the pure measure of the Church's being."⁹³ The virginity of Mary as a figure of the Church is a common theme in many of the Fathers of the Church⁹⁴; nevertheless, says M. L. Gubler, these symbolizations should not lead us to make of Mary "the exclusive criterion of our faith."⁹⁵

⁹⁰ Cf. H. U. von Balthasar, *Mary for Today* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 29, 52-53.

⁹¹ See T. Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate: A Marian Narrative of Women's Salvation* (London/New York: Continuum, 2002), 127.

⁹² Cf. Ziegenaus, *Marienlexikon*, 3:481.

⁹³ Ratzinger, "You Are Full of Grace: Elements of Biblical Devotion," *Communio* (Eng.) 16 (1989): 58. For a more complete assessment of Ratzinger's Mary-Church relationship in this perspective, that of virginity, see: J. Roten, "Mary—'Personal Concretization of the Church,'" *Marian Studies* 57 (2006): 286 ff.

⁹⁴ C. González, *María, Evangelizada y Evangelizadora*, 202.

⁹⁵ M. L. Gubler, "Die Mutter Jesu im Zeugnis der Evangelien," in *Was willst du von mir, Frau?: Maria in heutiger Sicht*, ed. J. Pfammatter and E. Christen (Freiburg, Switzerland: Paulusverlag, 1995), 31.

(3) In recent years we have been witnessing some laudable efforts to give importance once again to St. Joseph, very likely thanks also to the publication of *Redemptoris Custos*.⁹⁶ L. Deiss meditates on the relation between Joseph and Mary ever Virgin,⁹⁷ and H. Stirnimann calls to mind a truth often forgotten, namely that Mary's role in our faith has a biblical foundation before all else. Now the figure of Mary cannot be separated from that of Joseph.⁹⁸ Did she involve Joseph in her total consecration to God? Was it a question of a decision by the couple? What is the role played by the one who is rightly considered to be the *pater familias* in the culture of his day? The depth of the mystery of Joseph deserves to be rediscovered.⁹⁹ Recent publications heighten the awareness of Joseph's role and importance.¹⁰⁰

C. The Virginity *in Partu*

While recognizing that there is no necessary or indispensable link between the Incarnation and virginity,¹⁰¹ and that virginal conception is not to be put on the same level as the Resurrection,¹⁰² we must recognize that God willed it¹⁰³ and that there is question of "something without precedent"¹⁰⁴; "it is the grace of a woman who is both mother and virgin."¹⁰⁵ The Christological basis is therefore omnipresent. It is important in every stage of Mary's virginity, before, during, and after the birth of Jesus.¹⁰⁶

⁹⁶ John Paul II, "Redemptoris Custos," AAS 82 (1990): 5-34.

⁹⁷ L. Deiss, *Joseph, Mary, Jesus* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 30-34.

⁹⁸ H. Stirnimann, *Marjam*, 250-251.

⁹⁹ Cf. M. D. Philippe, *Le mystère de Joseph* (Paris: Ed. Saint Paul, 1997), 20-31, 83-112.

¹⁰⁰ L. Perrotta, *Saint Joseph: His Life and His Role in the Church Today* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2000); R. Foley, *Saint Joseph: Patron of the Triumph* (Goleta, CA: Queenship, 2002).

¹⁰¹ Cf. R. Laurentin, *Vie authentique de Jésus Christ*, 2:76-77.

¹⁰² García Paredes, *Mariología*, 331-332.

¹⁰³ Cf. S. Muñoz Iglesias, in *María del Evangelio: Las primeras generaciones cristianas hablan de María*, ed. A. Aparicio (Madrid: Publicaciones Claretianas, 1994), 176.

¹⁰⁴ Ziegenaus, *Marienlexikon*, 3:481.

¹⁰⁵ J. C. R. García Paredes, in *María del Evangelio*, ed. A. Aparicio (Madrid: Publicaciones Claretianas, 1994), 60.

¹⁰⁶ G. L. Müller, *Was heisst: Geboren von der Jungfrau Maria*, 108 ff.

Despite the radical condemnation of the biological interpretation of Mary's virginity by certain authors,¹⁰⁷ most mariologists consider the virginity *in partu* as being an integral aspect of the virginal conception. To the miraculous character of the conception corresponds the miraculous character of the birth.¹⁰⁸ The virginity *in partu* is part of the deposit of faith. It was taught by both the ordinary and the extraordinary magisterium in an organic way (the organicism in the exposition of the faith or the *nexus mysteriorum*).¹⁰⁹ It is part of the entire context of the divine maternity. Thus, the virginal conception and birth are two correlative moments in the history of salvation. There may be beautiful unanimity in saying that fact and significance are not to be separated, but we must also refrain from any exaggerated biological suppositions.¹¹⁰ As for more explicit precision on the matter, it is in general limited to this: "The virginal integrity remains."¹¹¹ Important considerations invite caution in this respect, namely: To watch and purify the metaphors used, to avoid any biological fixation without minimizing the bodily aspect, to forestall any kind of division into biological and theological spheres in order to avoid an ever lurking gnosticism; such are the reasons for the generally prudent statements on this topic.¹¹² The reasons mentioned reflect the teaching of the magisterium that Christ's birth did not impair Mary's virginal integrity but consecrated it.¹¹³

¹⁰⁷ Christa Mulack, *Maria, die geheime Göttin im Christentum* (Stuttgart: Kreuz-Verlag, 1985), 45: "Die biologische Deutung der Jungfrauensymbolik fügt dem Christentum einen unermesslichen Schaden zu . . ."

¹⁰⁸ Cf. B. Gherardini, *La madre Maria in una sintesi storico-teologica* (Frigento: Casa Mariana, 1989), 93 ff.; B. Forte, *Maria, la donna icona del misterio. Saggio di mariologia simbolico-narrativa* (2nd ed., Milano: Ed. Paoline, 1989), 107.

¹⁰⁹ Perrella, "Il parto verginale di Maria nel dibattito teologico," 208-209.

¹¹⁰ C. González, *Maria, Evangelizada y Evangelizadora*, 275-276; García Paredes, *Mariología*, 333: "El reduccionismo biologista del hecho es pornografía teológica."

¹¹¹ B. Sesboué, *Pédagogie du Christ, Eléments de christologie fondamentale* (Paris: Cerf, 1994), 207.

¹¹² G. L. Müller, *Was beisst: Geboren von der Jungfrau Maria*, 12.

¹¹³ LG 57. The formula "Filius suus primogenitus qui virginitatem ejus integritatem non minuit sed sacravit" is both apt and ancient and has been a great boon to theologians commenting on this difficult subject (St. Leo, *Ep. ad Flav.*, PL 54, 759; Council of Chalcedon, Mansi 7, 462; St. Ambrose, *De inst. virg.*, PL 16, 320; Lateran Council, 649, Can. 3, Mansi 10, 1151).

The Church has always been prudent in its teaching on this matter,¹¹⁴ but this will not prevent theologians from raising questions and suggesting new solutions. The call for a global understanding of Mary's role ("holistic understanding of Mary as the prophetess") in the Incarnation might suggest a certain ambiguity as regards physical integrity. This seems to be the case in the catechism for adults by the German bishops (1985) and in certain statements by W. Kasper.¹¹⁵ We are alluding to the physical integrity during and after the birth, put in question by K. Rahner, and *soi-disant* used by W. Kasper in the catechism referred to with the following statement: "It was not the physiological event of birth that was different. . . ."¹¹⁶ It may be stated in passing that we owe to an open letter of W. Kasper on the virginal conception, the reprisal and positive renewal of this theme in Germany and the United States.¹¹⁷ Some other authors suggest that it is not necessary to make a categorical decision in this matter in view of the absence of any exact teaching about it in Scripture and in the professions of faith.¹¹⁸ The opinion of D. Fernandez is quite clear: "The perfect virginity of Mary has nothing to do with the way the birth actually took place."¹¹⁹ The author, who takes a stand against the physical integrity and the absence of any birth pangs, proposes an outright separation between the birth of Jesus and the virginity

¹¹⁴ See St. Leo and the Lateran Council of 649.

¹¹⁵ See J. O'Connor, "Ambrose and Karl Rahner . . .," 727-728.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 727.

¹¹⁷ See W. Kasper, "Letter on the Virgin Birth," *Communio* (Eng.) 15/2 (Summer 1988): 262-265.

¹¹⁸ See C. González, *María, Evangelizada y Evangelizadora. Mariología* (Bogotá: CELAM, 1988), 432-433, and the contrary position of J. Galot (A constant! Beginning with *Marie dans l'Évangile* [Paris: Desclée de Bouwer, 1958], 76-79, and his *Pleine de Grâce* [1960], 27-30), and of I. de La Potterie, *Marie dans le mystère de l'Alliance*, 166-168. See also García Paredes, *Mariología*, 337: "El parto no es objeto de fe en cuanto acontecimiento fisiológico-biológico, sino en cuanto acontecimiento espiritual-personal."

¹¹⁹ D. Fernandez, "Virgo in Partu. Cuestion marginal reincidente," *Marianum* 58 (1996) and *id.*, "Natus ex Maria Virgine. Reflexiones sobre el nacimiento de Jesús," in *Kecharitomene. Mélanges René Laurentin* (Paris: Desclée, 1990), 291-308.

of Mary. While not unaware of ecclesial tradition on this matter, he considers it erroneous.¹²⁰

Opinions about the absence of birth pangs vary. While admitting that Mary is exempt from the curse of Genesis 3:16, one may well ask if she is totally exempt from the pains of birthgiving (Isa. 66:7). A. Ziegenaus envisages a suffering linked to a possible absence of sense or of comprehension (*Sinnleere*), since Mary is not exempt from participating in redemptive suffering,¹²¹ whereas for B. Forte—in a position close to that of K. Rahner and L. Boff—physical suffering is more probable since the admission of moral suffering would mean the recognition of a lack of redemption.¹²² Is it thus admissible to conceive of a physical suffering while holding to physical integrity? The specific content of the virginity *in partu* has never been defined by the magisterium. On the other hand, we have to insist on the close connection between Marian data and those of Christology. Thus, is it even conceivable to conclude that while closely following the *Suffering Servant*, Mary would remain exempt from all suffering at the moment—none more eminently Christological!—which marks the birth of the one who is going to suffer death in order to save us?¹²³ Typological method regaining momentum in the present, some authors, using the Patristic identification of Mary with the Ark of the Covenant to highlight the sacred space of her body, nonetheless concede with regard to the issue of suffering: “The anguish of the woman of the Apocalypse could represent the

¹²⁰ For a more comprehensive and balanced treatment of this issue, see A. Ziegenaus, *Katholische Dogmatik V. Maria in der Heilsgeschichte: Mariologie* (Aachen: MM Verlag, 1998), 258–265. Hereafter referred to as *Mariologie*.

¹²¹ *Marienlexikon*, 3:480. See C. González, *María, Evangelizada y Evangelizadora*, 432–433, and the contrary position of J. Galot (1960) and of I. de La Potterie (1988). [See n. 118 above.] See also García Paredes, *Mariología*, 337: “El parto no es objeto de fe en cuanto acontecimiento fisiológico-biológico, sino en cuanto acontecimiento espiritual-personal.”

¹²² B. Forte, *Maria, la donna icona del misterio*, 109.

¹²³ Cf. C. González, *María en los Padres griegos*, 482.

desire to bring Christ to the world; or it could represent the spiritual sufferings that were the price of Mary's motherhood."¹²⁴

D. The Perpetual Virginity

One must have a daring faith to profess the perpetual virginity,¹²⁵ and where this faith is lacking it risks being changed into an exclamation of frustration.¹²⁶ The ongoing discussion points to the theological and human difficulty of this theme. Mary's permanent virginity goes beyond any documentary testimony. It is an expression of praise that originates in our faith.¹²⁷ The interest of exegesis in this question is indirect,¹²⁸ save for the discussion about the brothers and sisters of Jesus brought up every now and then by exegetical or theological discourse in a large sense.¹²⁹

One of the most recent of these discussions ends—on the part of one of the participants—in a *non possum* (I am not able) as regards the dogmatic definition, but, at the same time, declares assent and solidarity as to the spiritual dimension of the perpetual virginity.¹³⁰ Christology concerns itself with it

¹²⁴ Scott Hahn, *Hail, Holy Queen: The Mother of God in the Word of God* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 62.

¹²⁵ E Courth, "Jungfrauengeburt-ein theologisches Dauerthema," 109.

¹²⁶ Cf. M. C. Jacobelli, *Onestà verso Maria. Considerazioni sui testi mariani del primo millennio* (Brescia: Queriniana, 1996), which accords Mary "a sexually active marriage."

¹²⁷ R. Brown, *Responses to 101 Questions . . .*, 93; "We [Roman Catholics] accept this doctrine of the 'Ever Virgin' not on the basis of a biblical text, but from Christian reflection on the sanctity of Mary and the way in which that sanctity was expressed in her life."

¹²⁸ See J. Zmijewski, *Die Mutter des Messias. Maria in der Christusverkündigung des Neuen Testaments, eine exegetische Studie* (Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1989), 166-167.

¹²⁹ See further on the exegetical aspects. As to the theological approach, see: Paul-Laurent Carle, O.P., *Les quatre frères de Jésus et la maternité virginale de Marie* (Paris: Éditions de l'Emmanuel, 2004), 95-99.

¹³⁰ E Refoulé, *Les frères et sœurs de Jésus. Frères ou cousins?* (Paris: Desclée, 1995), 113-114, offers the only solution that he believes is compatible with the requirements of the historical method, to wit: "It consists in reinterpreting the dogma of the perpetual virginity of Mary by making it a 'spiritual' virginity, that is, the absence of all sin . . ."

rarely.¹³¹ So it remains for mariologists to keep watch over this doctrine (Jelly, Pozo, Laurentin, Courth, G. L. Müller, Navarro Puerto, de Fiores, etc.). They agree in saying that the doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity clearly illustrates the Church's evolution in its understanding of the content of faith, a content that is not found explicitly in the Scriptures.¹³²

Notable work has been achieved in the realm of meaning. Thanks to the post-Resurrection reading of the life of Jesus in recent Christologies,¹³³ Mary emerges more clearly as an objective and permanent datum of the history of salvation. Insofar as she is virgin, she is the icon of the Son. At the same time, she is an icon of the Virgin Church and represents, in an anthropological perspective, the feminine archetype of life-giving welcome and receptiveness.¹³⁴ This reading of the perpetual virginity as *datum* finds support in the "identification" of Mary with the Daughter of Sion,¹³⁵ and finds an echo, early on already, in the interpretation of John 19:26-27, favoring the perpetual virginity.¹³⁶ It may be observed here that the reasons of suitability¹³⁷ and of non-contradiction with Scripture¹³⁸ have an important place in the reflection on the perpetual virginity, and always had. They do raise the risk of provoking an excessive symbolizing, which, in its turn, can cloud the mind with

¹³¹ Cf. B. Sesboué, *Pédagogie du Christ*, 204-206.

¹³² E. Jelly, *Madonna: Mary in the Catholic Tradition* (Huntington, IN: OSV Publishers, 1986), 89.

¹³³ See, e.g., G. O'Collins, S.J., *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 47 ff.

¹³⁴ Cf. B. Forte, "La verginità perpetua di Maria: realtà e valore simbolico nella teologia contemporanea," in *Atti di Capua* (1992), 1:267-283. For a most recent reference to Mary's virginity understood as archetype of the Church, see C. Schaller, "Mariens Jungfräulichkeit als Urbild der Kirche," in *Geboren aus der Jungfrau Maria*, Mariologische Studien 19, ed. A. Ziegenaus (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 2007), 148-162.

¹³⁵ Cf. A. Longobardi, "Maria, Figlia di Sion," in *Atti di Capua* (1992), 1:577ff.

¹³⁶ Cf. B. Amata, "Giovanni 19, 26-27 come prova scritturistica della perpetua verginità di Maria; origine e sviluppo di questa esegesi," in *Atti di Capua* (1992), 1:156ff.

¹³⁷ Cf. A. Serra "Virgen," in *Nuevo diccionario de mariología* (Span.) (Madrid: Ed. Paulinas, 1988), 2010ff.

¹³⁸ U. Casale, *Benedetta fra le donne. Saggio teologico sulla mariologia e la questione femminile* (Leumann: Editrice Elle Di Ci, 1989), 61.

respect to real difficulties, to formulate unwarranted spiritual and moral expectations and demands, and to provoke the ire of those who see themselves as non-conforming victims.¹³⁹

V. EXEGETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The exegetical account for our period cannot be written without the explicit mention of the global vision of I. de La Potterie, the sound judgment of J. Galot, the originality of S. Muñoz-Iglesias, the work of "inculturation" of A. Serra, the expert enthusiasm of R. Laurentin, and the marked contribution of many other authors. In this fine assemblage we must not forget the Nordic counterpoint (Kirchschläger, Gubler) and the American challenge (Brown, Fitzmyer). Now, it is not our intention to follow these authors step-by-step or to comment on the brief interesting monographs that have been published in recent years. We should like to present here a certain number of atmospheric observations on the status of our subject within the context of current exegesis.

A. "... a nuance *encor*..."

Paul Verlaine, French poet, wants nuance not color, for only nuance is able to bridge opposition and reconcile ideas ("la nuance seule fiance").

Characterizing the present exegetical situation regarding our subject frequently amounts to a question of nuance, sensibility or bias. H. Küng will say that even Catholic exegetes now agree—even though the use of historical elements cannot be excluded—that the accounts of Jesus' birth are in large part uncertain from the historical point of view, that they are highly legendary or ultimately theologically motivated.¹⁴⁰ Cranfield, though not a Catholic, would present the state of the question with a different nuance: "It is correct to state that until now no

¹³⁹ Cf. Marie-Jeanne Bérère, "Les figures de Marie au cœur de la théologie de l'Incarnation," in *Théologie, histoire et piété mariale*, 90-91. A recent contribution to this attitudinal reading of Mary's virginity can be found in J. Kreiml, "Die 'Virginitas Post Partum,'" in *Geboren aus der Jungfrau Maria*, Mariologische Studien 19, ed. A. Ziegenaus, 132-137.

¹⁴⁰ H. Küng, *Credo* (Munich: Piper Verlag, 1992), 41.

proof has been produced of the non-historical character of the virginal conception."¹⁴¹ For Spinetoli, the extreme positions (historic literary genre versus mythic literary genre) have been abandoned, but "all the intermediate positions have their defenders."¹⁴² R. Brown guards against a position that maintains that "everything is clear and convincing," but also against the one that would claim that the text proves the contrary ("when at most it is obscure"). According to him, it is better to leave the matter to the magisterium than to strain biblical evidence.¹⁴³

Must we conclude with Perrella and some others that the matter is "wide open"?¹⁴⁴ that none of these authors would even think of presenting a strictly historical reading, but relates his personal understanding about the beginnings of the life of Christ,¹⁴⁵ or, to put it differently, condones that the theological validity does not depend on historical demonstration.¹⁴⁶ Not unheard of—exegetes aware of the exegetical problems related to the virginity try to avoid the passages in question sometimes like a minefield,¹⁴⁷ but in general the present status is characterized by a somewhat minimalist discourse which proceeds by elimination borrowed—one would say—from the method of negative theology. It is interesting, for example, to see how the virginity *in partu* is formulated. In general, the most obvious descriptive elements are omitted, sometimes to the extent of eliminating any direct reference to virginity. This is the case with Beinert, who offers the following formulation: "As at Nazareth, Mary is presented to us here (that is, in the

¹⁴¹ C. E. B. Cranfield, "Some Reflections on the Subject of the Virgin Birth," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 41 (1988): 177. This, after having said that no one has ever been able to prove the historicity of an event by the historical-critical method.

¹⁴² O. da Spinetoli, in a report of the XXXI *Settimana biblica nazionale dell'Albi* (19-14 Sett. 1990), 133.

¹⁴³ R. Brown, *Responses to 101 Questions*, 91.

¹⁴⁴ S. Perrella, "Il parto verginale di Maria nel dibattito teologico," 174, here with respect to the virginity *in partu*.

¹⁴⁵ W. Kirchschräger, in *Marienlexikon*, 3:467.

¹⁴⁶ García Paredes, *Mariología*, 333.

¹⁴⁷ B. Buby, *Mary of Galilee* (3 vols., New York: Alba House, 1994-1997), 1:75.

virginity *in partu*) as the servant of the Lord, committed body and soul, and turned completely towards the Lord."¹⁴⁸ Here the discourse readily ends on a neutral stance, on neither one nor the other. In contrast with this exegesis honestly borrowed, we are confronted with a certain vulgarization that shines with a pseudo-savant certitude.¹⁴⁹

B. Exegetical Pluralism

The obsession with historicity and the monopoly held by the historical-critical method seems to have given place to a broader exegetical pluralism.¹⁵⁰ We note since the early 1990s a veritable profusion of methods based for the most part on an interpretation of the text and of its reception. F. J. Hartin and J. H. Petzer contrast historical criticism with some fifteen other exegetical approaches that range from an analysis of discourse to the theory of contextualization.¹⁵¹

What is common to most of these methods is the importance given to the place of the one receiving the text and what the text means for the one who reads the message. The humanist interpretation of T. W. Jennings is typical of this new development.¹⁵² It is placed between the historical-critical investigation and the dogmatic or institutional appropriation of the text in order to appeal to the reader directly and to foster both

¹⁴⁸ *Glaubenszugänge: Lehrbuch der Katholischen Dogmatik*, ed. W. Beinert (3 vols., Paderborn: F. Schöningh, 1995), 2:356.

¹⁴⁹ See Sharon H. Ringe, *Luke* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 32-33, who offers this conclusion: "... nothing in the language ... itself requires the interpretation of a 'virginal conception' or a birth any more 'miraculous' than every occasion of new life."

¹⁵⁰ A give-away for this metamorphosis are titles such as M. Levering's *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008) and a print and electronic resource, "Scriptural Exegesis: The Shapes of Culture and the Religious Imagination" (Festschrift Michael Fishbane), ed. D. A. Green and L. S. Lieber (Oxford: Oxford University Press/Oxford Scholarship Online, 2009).

¹⁵¹ F. J. Hartin, J. H. Petzer, and B. Metzger, *Text and Interpretation: New Approaches in the Criticism of the New Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1991).

¹⁵² T. W. Jennings, Jr., and H. Boers, *Text and Logos: The Humanistic Interpretation of the New Testament* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1990).

biblical and humanist culture.¹⁵³ Rising above historical-critical method, thanks to a literary approach, K. Gros Louis intends to raise the reader's appreciation for the Infancy Gospels.¹⁵⁴ May it be said that these attempts at interpretation provide only incidental interest in the historic foundation of the birth of Christ and its biological character. This is the stance of D. E. Middleton¹⁵⁵ who works according to a method called rhetorical criticism (promoted by Phyllis Tribble) in order to highlight the aspects of "complete surprise" and "new creation in the Spirit."¹⁵⁶ Mary-Virgin thus becomes the image of the model disciple, characterized by obedience, sacrifice of self and concern for social justice.¹⁵⁷ Beverly R. Gaventa, who likewise chooses the literary quest, shows us that the sacred authors present Mary as a literary character. She is concerned to call attention to the roles Mary plays within a given narrative context.¹⁵⁸ The virginal conception is not questioned. It is treated as a narrative fact or event which contributes to the general characterization of Mary. The evangelists are not anxious to "justify" the exceptional circumstances of the birth of Christ. In the variety of their Marian portraits, there is nevertheless a unity: Mary makes explicit the idea of scandal that surrounds the Incarnation.¹⁵⁹ What is striking in Gaventa's book is the juxtaposition without a marked distinction between the canonical texts and the apocryphal gospels.¹⁶⁰ Gaventa's approach is not isolated. Mary F Foskett, in a more recent study, brackets off considerations about the historical Mary and her virginity to consider instead the literary figure in Luke-Acts and

¹⁵³ Ibid., IX and X.

¹⁵⁴ Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis, "Different Ways of Looking at the Birth of Jesus," *Bible Review* 1 (1985): 33-40.

¹⁵⁵ Deborah E. Middleton, "The Story of Mary: Luke's Version," *New Blackfriars* 70/833 (Dec. 1989): 555-564.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 559-560.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 563.

¹⁵⁸ Beverly R. Gaventa, *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 20-27.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 128-129.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 119.

the Proto-Evangelium of James as it compares to Greco-Roman views on virginity.¹⁶¹ The same approach is found in a larger movement that intends to rehabilitate the apocryphal writings as historical and cultural documents.¹⁶² T. Beattie follows a similar descriptive approach, but one that is more poetic. Underlining the miraculous aspects of the virginal conception as God's victory over humankind, this approach avoids the problem of historicity and shows reserve in describing the concrete realities of birth (a favorite subject of celibate theologians—according to her!).¹⁶³

In this panoply of methods, also including functional exegesis,¹⁶⁴ a political reading of the Gospels has a special place. R. Horsley asks for the freeing of Christmas from its contemporary context of apolitical romanticism and aggressive materialism in order to restore its original historical context: "The original Christmas story was plainly political!"¹⁶⁵ This same political dimension is called for by H. Küng.¹⁶⁶ In the original reading of the Infancy Gospels, he discovers a nucleus of liberation theology that is indispensable for restoring some equilibrium to current "psycho-theology."¹⁶⁷

As was indicated for most of the cases mentioned, the virginal conception and or the virginal birth, that is, Mary-Virgin is neither discussed nor questioned. Its function is that of a narrative fact or event. It is taken for granted as such or serves as an argument to promote some vested interest or an ideological commitment. This being said, exegetical pluralism includes ways which pursue more classical avenues. A. K. M. Adam, for example, proposes for the study of the Infancy Narratives (but not only!) the concept of "Signifying Practice," which envisages

¹⁶¹ M. E. Foskett, *A Virgin Conceived: Mary and Classical Representations of Virginity* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002), 4.

¹⁶² See Stirnimann, *Marjam*, 231-234. This retrieval effort prompts O. de Spinetti to say that the apocrypha are to Luke and Matthew what a Neapolitan crèche is to the crèche of St. Francis.

¹⁶³ T. Beattie, *Rediscovering Mary: Insights from the Gospels* (Liguori, MO: Triumph Books, 1995), 57-58, 26.

¹⁶⁴ A. Ory, *Riscoprire la verità storica dei Vangeli. Vera iniziazione all'esegesi funzionale* (Milano: Massimo, 1986).

¹⁶⁵ R. Horsley, "Liberating Christmas," *Christianity in Crisis* (Dec. 12, 1988): 438.

¹⁶⁶ H. Küng, *Credo* (1992), 45-47.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

"exegesis and theology as complementary aspects of an integrated pursuit."¹⁶⁸

C. The Narrative Solution?

W. Pannenberg tells us that "the narrative is not meaningless."¹⁶⁹ Recently, a growing number of monographs have been making use of the narrative approach. We have in mind L. Bruckberger,¹⁷⁰ J. Suarez-Guans,¹⁷¹ M. McKenna,¹⁷² M. Malinski¹⁷³ and—up to a certain point—O. Battaglia.¹⁷⁴ We must not forget the fine book by R. Bichelberger, a writer who tries to find Mary in her "real life" (Thérèse). In the chapter on the Annunciation he adds the following remark: "The marvel of God is that what is impossible to man is possible for God."¹⁷⁵ It may be premature to speak of a narrative solution to the question of Mary's virginity. However, story theology is the theology of the believing heart; its approval favors a theological reading of virginity and resorts generously to apocryphal materials.¹⁷⁶ The same, or a similar method is used in Christology.¹⁷⁷

¹⁶⁸ A. K. M. Adam, *Faithful Interpretation: Reading the Bible in a Postmodern World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 156; see also E. Bovon, *Luke the Theologian* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), in which the author discusses—mainly positively—Laurentin's views on the Infancy Narratives, questioning, however, an exaggerated and "apologetic concern to derive certain traditions from Mary herself" (183).

¹⁶⁹ See Pannenberg's *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 2:318.

¹⁷⁰ *Marie, Mère de Jésus-Christ* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1991).

¹⁷¹ *La Donzella de Nazaret. Historia de la Virgen María* (Madrid: Ed. Palabras, 1995).

¹⁷² *Mary: Shadow of Grace* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995).

¹⁷³ *María, die Frau aus Nazareth* (Graz: Verlag Styria, 1987).

¹⁷⁴ *La madre del mio Signore. Maria nei vangeli di Luca e di Giovanni* (Assisi: Cittadella Editrice, 1994).

¹⁷⁵ R. Bichelberger, *Marie, Mère de Dieu* ([Monaco]: Ed. du Rocher, 1997).

¹⁷⁶ See Choan-Seng Song, *The Believing Heart: An Invitation to Story Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999). As to the connection between "narrative theology" and the apocryphals with regard to virginity, see, e.g., G. T. Zervos, "Seeking the Source of the Marian Myth: Have We Found the Missing Link?" in *Which Mary? The Marys of Early Christian Tradition*, ed. F. Stanley Jones (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2003), 107 ff.; Sherry Angela Smith, "The Making of the Virgin in the Protevangelium of James" (MA Thesis, Wilfrid Laurier University, 2004). The author invites readers to focus less on virginity and chastity but to explore and highlight Mary's extraordinary purity (136).

¹⁷⁷ See A. Stock, *Poetische Dogmatik: Christologie* (3 vols., Paderborn: F. Schöningh, 1995); R. Laurentin, *Vie authentique de Jésus Christ, I. Récit* (Paris: Fayard, 1996).

The narrative method is used in recounting an event; it relates and does not criticize. In recounting the history of Mary, it favors the integration of the reader's faith and action.¹⁷⁸ Human experience is narrative. History is a totality. It recounts an event, the entire event, from beginning to end. It presents an explanation thereof and its meaning, not through a justification of a logical type but through the coherence of the account itself. One of the most recent attempts to recount the life of Mary stems from the pen of René Laurentin: his *Vie Authentique de Marie*.¹⁷⁹ The "récit concret de cette vie," based entirely on scriptural witness, is followed by a series of annexes devoted to "fondements et preuves." Among them, we find the central piece of Laurentin's argumentation regarding Mary's virginity: "Les Évangiles de l'enfance ne sont pas des fictions" (the infancy narratives are not fiction).¹⁸⁰ His analysis echoes Charles L. Quarles's conclusion that it is incorrect to assert that Matthew is Midrash.¹⁸¹

In this context, the virginal conception and birth are simply presented, without any preliminaries or prejudgments. The narrative speaks for itself. It dispenses with commentary. The advantage of speaking about the virginity in this way is, first of all, the primacy given to the event and the respect accorded to the text or to history. The explanation of particular aspects—in this case the virginal conception and birth—occurs again in and through the rendering of the totality of the story. The narrative approach further allows for the possibility of isolating some generic or biographical characteristics reinforcing the profile of the virgin. Thus, Stirnimann¹⁸² moving from a narrative context, tries to highlight significant traits of Mary, which are, in his mind, typical or at least related to her virginity: a young woman, a consenting woman, an independent woman.

¹⁷⁸ M. W. Luera-Whitmore, "The Role of Story-telling in Christian Formation," doctoral thesis, School of Theology at Clermont, 1980, 179 p.

¹⁷⁹ Paris: Éditions de l'Oeuvre, 2008.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 366-371.

¹⁸¹ Charles L. Quarles, *Midrash Criticism: Introduction and Appraisal* (Lanham: University of America Press, 1998), 61.

¹⁸² Ibid., 247-251, 257-259.

Is the narrative solution a real solution? We need not see in narration a universal cure-all. For what happens when the topic under scrutiny is not something that is taken up by history, as is the case, for example, with the perpetual virginity? Nevertheless, narration can have added value of a pastoral character.¹⁸³ Art as narration may be an example of such kind: exploring Mary's life by walking a gallery of her paintings, discovering thereby how much her person transcends the narrow frame of theology! But even here a certain vision of virginity is out of harm: Mary's assent to a divine project because it also responds to a profound desire of who she is and wants to be.¹⁸⁴

D. "Will It Fly?"—Pragmatic Exegesis

We must point out some recent and surprising endeavors to explain the Incarnation of Jesus. G. Bostock attributes the paternity of Jesus to Zachary, and places this interpretation within the context of sacred marriages (known not only in the pagan world, but likewise to Judaism of those days . . . according to the author!) where the cohabitation of a king or priest with a virgin made it possible to assure a divine origin to the child.¹⁸⁵ J. E. Barrett, less excessive but more insidious, suggests the solution of a normal union between Joseph and Mary, establishing thus a parallel, somewhat forced, with Boaz and Ruth (Ruth 4:13).¹⁸⁶ In answer to Barrett, J. Crouch opts for a solution by faith: the Infancy Gospels are a profession of faith destined to arouse the faith of the reader. According to the author, the intention of faith transcends the questions about the historic or symbolic origin by making them superfluous.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸³ See García Paredes, *Mariología*, Chap. 5: "Maria y las Diosas: El contexto religioso de Asia Menor," 185.

¹⁸⁴ See Edith Vallée, *La Madone Libertaire* (Paris: Éditions Imago, 2002), 82.

¹⁸⁵ G. Bostock, "Virgin Birth or Human Conception," *The Expository Times* 97/9 (1985/86): 260-263. See also the response of G. P. Benson, "Virgin Birth, Virgin Conception," *The Expository Times* 98/5 (1987): 139-140.

¹⁸⁶ J. E. Barrett, "Can Scholars Take the Virgin Birth Seriously?" *Bible Review* 4 (1988): 10-16, here 16.

¹⁸⁷ J. E. Crouch, "How Early Christians Viewed the Virgin Birth of Jesus," *Bible Review* 7 (October 1991): 37-38.

Craig L. Blomberg offers a modified version of the theory on the illegitimacy of Jesus. The accusation or the suspicion of Jesus' illegitimacy in Matthew leads the author to reverse the discourse: Jesus announces God's liberation of those who are accused, whether rightly or wrongly, of the same defect of birth.¹⁸⁸ We must also mention the book by G. Parrinder on Jesus, son of Joseph.¹⁸⁹ Living a normal conjugal life, Joseph and Mary, young and passionate, gave life to many children of whom Jesus is the firstborn.¹⁹⁰ This biographical speculation is inspired, among other things, by the idea that Mary-Virgin ("earthmother" for the author) and the virginal conception and birth are incompatible with a true appreciation of marriage and sexuality. Aside from biographical speculation we have—on a lesser level but more popular—a "New Age"-inspired mystico-syncretist literature where anything goes because inspired by the "Mother God" herself, and where virginity or its absence apply according to convenience.¹⁹¹

These recent efforts, all of them of an Anglo-Saxon provenance, can certainly surprise us. However, they come from the pens of specialists, who in part take up again a number of old theories (among others, Bultmann's *Religionsgeschichte*). We find ourselves faced with a style of exegesis that tries to be pragmatic and empirical. A new theory judged to be of public interest is advanced, discussed, modified and often withdrawn without any rancor or further discussion. The provisional theory, sometimes anecdotal, serves as an engine to advance "exegetical science."

¹⁸⁸ Blomberg specifies that "this liberation, in turn, threatened to overthrow those who claimed legitimate political and/or religious power but who were, in fact, the true bastards." See "The Liberation of Illegitimacy: Women and Rulers in Matthew 1-2," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 21/4 (Winter 1991): 145-150, here 149.

¹⁸⁹ G. Parrinder, *Son of Joseph: The Parentage of Jesus* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992).

¹⁹⁰ See the reactions of B. Daley, "Born of the Virgin," 19 (December 26, 1992); 1598/99 and R. Brown, *Birth of the Messiah* (1993²), 703.

¹⁹¹ See Sylvia Browne, *The Two Marys: The Hidden History of the Mother and Wife of Jesus* (New York: Dutton—Penguin Group (USA), 2007), 5f., 9, 35.

E. Some Highlights

The special problems linked to the exegesis of our question for the recent decades are numerous. We had to make a selection. Following the weight of quantitative analysis we will give our attention to three highlights: the brothers and sisters of Jesus, John 1:13-14, and the vow of virginity.

1. *The Brothers and Sister of Jesus*

While F. Refoulé opts for a "spiritual" interpretation of the dogma citing his own *non possum* pressured by allegiance to "metho-history,"¹⁹² Aline Lizotte¹⁹³ builds dams against exegetical and doctrinal erosion: 1) It is impossible—she writes—to base oneself on the sacred text to affirm that the brothers of Jesus are the sons of Mary and consequently to deny Mary's perpetual virginity; 2) It is in Scripture and not in the apocrypha that the Fathers found the certitude for their faith in the perpetual virginity; 3) There certainly exists a tradition (*sensus fidei*, a consensus) on Mary's perpetual virginity.

Pere Franquesa¹⁹⁴ offers the now classical conclusion: Present-day exegesis cannot support the traditional Catholic and Orthodox conclusion. Neither does exegesis compel the contrary opinion, however: "A definitive solution cannot be given based on the biblical data."¹⁹⁵ The idea of the perpetual virginity is not asserted nor does it flow spontaneously from Sacred Scripture. The solution given to the problem will depend on the value given to the Church's magisterium.

Pozo,¹⁹⁶ who argues in favor of an exegetical interpretation favoring the perpetual virginity, adduces four arguments (that

¹⁹² F. Refoulé, *Les frères et sœurs de Jésus, Frères ou cousins?* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1995), 113-114.

¹⁹³ "Peut-on continuer à appeler Marie: La Sainte Vierge?" *Esprit et Vie* 106/2, nos. 37, 38, 39 (sept.-oct. 1996): 524 [in no. 39, sept. 26, 1996].

¹⁹⁴ P. Franquesa, "Los Hermanos de Jesús," in *María del Evangelio: las primeras generaciones cristianas hablan de María*, ed. A. Aparicio (Madrid: Publicaciones Claretianas, 1994), 105-117.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 117: "Hoy no puede darse una solución definitiva desde los datos bíblicos."

¹⁹⁶ C. Pozo, *María en la obra de la salvación* (Madrid: BAC, 1990²). In a more recent version of his mariology, *María, Nueva Eva* (Madrid: BAC, 2005), 281/282, Pozo

are well known) in its favor. 1) The word "firstborn" (Matt. 1:25; Luke 2:7) does not necessarily imply other brothers and sisters; 2) the semitic meaning of relative or cousin; 3) the brothers of Jesus are never referred to as sons of Mary; 4) of the four names mentioned (James, Joseph, Simon and Jude), James and Joseph are pointed out as sons of another Mary (distinct from Mary, the mother of Jesus).

On the subject of the perpetual virginity, Brown is in accord with saying that Catholic tradition firmly asserts it. It clarifies the uncertain picture presented by Scripture. But we must not condemn as non-Christian those who interpret the Gospel differently. Catholic doctrine concerning the perpetual virginity has never identified the "brothers" of Jesus. The strongest arguments (in favor of the brothers and sisters) were formulated after the Reformation (based on the literal sense of Scripture and on opposition to celibacy). Brown advances the argument that the question of the brothers and sisters was never raised by the Church directly and that the difference of interpretation depends on a particular church's understanding. Brown calls to mind, for example, the difference of opinion between Tertullian and Jerome.

Brown once again brings to mind that the brothers and sisters are never attributed to Mary, but they are met with in her company. On the other hand, the Greek word is not equivocal; it means what it says. Since the Protogospel of James, we have the tradition of cousins. But here we do not have a reliable historical source (attributed to a brother of Jesus). Again, on the other hand, in the Bible, there is very slight evidence in favor of the version "cousins."¹⁹⁷ There is also the imprecision of the semitic language, but Brown adds: "One would not go this route unless one had other evidence that blood brothers and sisters were not involved."¹⁹⁸ The pendulum keeps swinging. However, some of the contemporary focus has shifted from the

insists on the importance of an "análisis de las listas" of Jesus' brothers. In this recent study, the author seems to be more preoccupied with the demythologization of the virgin birth than with the brothers and sisters of Jesus.

¹⁹⁷ See Mark 15:40 and Matt. 27:56.

¹⁹⁸ Brown, *Responses to 101 Questions*, 92, 93-97.

brothers and sisters to the person of Mary in order to establish perpetual virginity as the "sublime form" (Scheffczyk) of her vocation and mission.¹⁹⁹

There was, some time ago, the brief controversy between J. P. Meier and R. Bauckham. The first establishes the hypothesis that the statements of Helvidius (children born after Jesus) were more convincing than the explanations of Epiphanius (child of a previous marriage) or those of Jerome (cousins).²⁰⁰ R. Bauckham, though not wishing to promote the perpetual virginity, rejects Meier's theory in favor of the opinion of Epiphanius. The opinion of this latter is the only one current up to the time of Tertullian (ca. 200+). According to Bauckham, the Syrian tradition represented in the apocrypha of James would have historic value. The term "cousin" could have been used to distinguish Jesus from children of a previous marriage of Joseph's.²⁰¹ For Elizabeth Johnson, who leans toward J. P. Meier and the solution of "some siblings," without explicitly saying so, all three positions "militate against Mary mothering a one-child family." Johnson's perspective, so wide open as to become unfocused, sees Mary "engaged in a great deal of direct or indirect parenting of a large brood."²⁰²

Thus, neither exegesis nor history carry the day. Paredes²⁰³ does not think that the exegetical arguments in favor of Mary's virginity are sufficient. Nor does Stirnimann find historical evidence clearly pointing one way or the other.²⁰⁴

¹⁹⁹ J. Kreiml, "Die Virginitas post partum. Zum Verständnis der 'Brüder und Schwestern' Jesu," in *"Geboren aus der Jungfrau Maria." Klarstellungen*, ed. A. Ziegenaus, Mariologische Studien 19 (Regensburg: F. Pustet, 2007), 140-147.

²⁰⁰ J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1991); see, esp., "The Brothers and Sisters of Jesus: An Ecumenical Perspective," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 54 (1992): 1-28 [hereafter, CBQ].

²⁰¹ R. Bauckham, "The Brothers and Sisters of Jesus: An Epiphanian Response to J. A. Meier," CBQ 54 (1994): 686-700. See also Laurence E. Frizzell, "Mary and the Biblical Heritage," *Marian Studies* 46 (1995): 30-31.

²⁰² E. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 198.

²⁰³ García Paredes, *Mariología*, 340-341.

²⁰⁴ Stirnimann, *Marjam*, 256.

Do the brothers and sisters then form a clear and distinct line of demarcation between Catholics and Protestants? This is still the case for B. Buby,²⁰⁵ who brings up some of the recent history of this topic, while already for Stirnimann the lines today are much confused and there is no longer a clear and distinct line of demarcation in this area.²⁰⁶ The general tenor of the discussion seems to move away from scriptural elucidation in order to concentrate on the reception and history of this particular point.²⁰⁷ We find among recent Catholic presentations more plain referencing of ecclesial texts, such as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and growing abstention from exegetical juggling of pros and cons.²⁰⁸ And may we indeed announce the dawn of confessional pacifism, building theological bridges for a common understanding of Mary's perpetual virginity, when hearing Timothy George concede: "To be sure, there is nothing theologically problematic about affirming Mary's perpetual virginity."²⁰⁹

2. John 1:13-14

The decades in question have not brought us a stringent answer to the problems raised by a reading of John 1:13-14. Reading this verse in the singular as proposed and promoted by such exegetes as Braun (1950), Boismard (1954) and more recently by J. Galot,²¹⁰ P. Hofrichter,²¹¹ I. de La Potterie²¹² and

²⁰⁵ The author here leans especially on Blinzler. See *Mary of Galilee*, 1:44.

²⁰⁶ Stirnimann, *Marjam*, 236.

²⁰⁷ See, e.g., José Pedrozo, "The Brothers of Jesus and His Mother's Virginity," *Thomist* 63 (1999): 92 ff.

²⁰⁸ See James R. White, *Mary: Another Redeemer?* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1998), 29-31.

²⁰⁹ T. George, "The Blessed Virgin Mary in Evangelical Perspective," in *Mary, Mother of God*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2004), 109.

²¹⁰ *Être né de Dieu, Jean 1, 13*, *Analecta Biblica* 37 (Rome: Institute biblique pontifical, 1969).

²¹¹ *Nicht aus Blut, sondern monogen aus Gott geboren. Textkritische, dogmengeschichtliche und exegetische Untersuchung zu Joh 1, 13-14*, *Forschung zur Bibel* 31 (Würzburg: Echter, 1978).

²¹² "La Mère de Jésus et la conception virginale du Fils de Dieu," *Marianum* 49 (1978): 41-90.

A. Vincent Cernuda,²¹³ has been the object of criticism on the part of such authors as M.-J. Lagrange, J. Schmid, P. Lamarche, C. H. Dodd, A. Wickenhauser, R. Schnackenburg, R. E. Brown, J. A. Fitzmyer, J. W. Pryor and X. L. Dufour. These authors propose a reading in the plural.

A. Feuillet raised two serious objections to the reading in the singular: the ensemble of Greek manuscripts has the plural, and the reading in the singular is attested to only by some Latin or Syriac versions and some patristic citations.²¹⁴ C. Pozo holds the same. He sees the reading in the singular encumbered with serious difficulties, among others the one arising from the biological understanding of those days (the mother alone producing blood!), but above all else because of what follows from the discovery of Bodmer P66 and P75 (second and third centuries).²¹⁵ Although in general for those favoring a reading of John 1:13 in the plural this seems to be a closed matter, we would like to present some important contributions from those who hold to the singular.

I. de La Potterie insists on the difference between manuscripts and commentaries. The totality of the oldest witnesses favor a reading in the singular, and thus its Christological significance. The author concludes that what we have here is the original form of this verse in St. John, modified—that is, changed into the plural—due to a misunderstanding of the expression “ex sanguinibus” (of bloods).²¹⁶ Falsification or not, the explanation of the loss of the original meaning, that in the singular, is presented as a hypothesis that would be positively

²¹³ “La doble generación de Jesu Cristo según 1:13-14,” *Estudios Bíblicos* 40 (1982): 49-117 and 315-344.

²¹⁴ A. Feuillet, “Le Sauveur messianique et sa mère dans les récits de l’enfance de Saint Matthieu et de Saint Luc,” *Divinitas* 34/2 (1990): 118; A. Feuillet returns to a reading in the plural, following J. W. Pryor, “On the Virgin Birth or the Birth of Christians? The Text of John 1:13 Once More,” *Novum Testamentum* 27 (1985): 296-318.

²¹⁵ See C. Pozo, *María en la obra de la salvación*, 272-273.

²¹⁶ I. de La Potterie, *Mary in the Mystery of the Covenant* (New York: Alba House, 1992), 101 (original Flemish version, 1985).

verified by theology and by the vocabulary of the Fourth Gospel.²¹⁷ Here we also rediscover the conclusions of J. Galot: "The unanimity of these manuscripts does not therefore prevent us from concluding that at the beginning the text was in the singular: the one who was engendered."²¹⁸ If the reading in the singular is thus guaranteed by both "the text and the context" (Galot), we may also conclude the same respecting the divine filiation and the virginal birth. P. Hofrichter follows the same line of argument.²¹⁹ The issue is not hotly disputed in the present. A. T. Lincoln follows the plural reading, a foregone conclusion for the author, and therefore no discussion of the reading in the singular.²²⁰ But we have Jaroslav Pelikan who, expanding on the "Metonymy: The Son as Only-Begotten, the Mother as Ever-Virgin," points to the liturgy and the dogmatic decrees of the councils to assert the Son of God as the "monogenaes" (the only-begotten).²²¹

B. Escaffre Ladet tries to draw up a balance sheet for the discussion.²²² The author himself follows the opinion favoring the reading in the singular, while admitting that practically all the current critical readings follow the plural. We cannot affirm categorically that John is speaking of a virginal conception.²²³

²¹⁷ Ibid., 102-106.

²¹⁸ J. Galot, "Maternité virginal de Marie et paternité divine. Que dit le Prologue de S. Jean 1:13?" *Esprit et Vie* (4 Janvier 1989): 57-64; for J. Galot, "There are two essential elements in the passage that must be taken into account: the accord of the first witnesses in favor of the singular and the reproach addressed to the gnostics for having changed the singular to the plural" (59). See also P. Robert, "La leçon christologique en Jean 1:13," *Revue Thomiste* 87 (1987): 5-22, which rejects the arguments of J. W. Pryor.

²¹⁹ See *Marienlexikon* 3:468-469; P. Hofrichter, "Eingeboren oder Einzig?" in *Uni trinoque Domino*, ed. H. Paarhammer and F. M. Schmölz, Festschrift for K. Berg (Thauer, Tirol: Österreichischer Kulturverlag, 1989), 195-211.

²²⁰ Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel according to Saint John*, Black's New Testament Commentaries (London/New York: Hendrickson Pub./Continuum, 2005), 102/103.

²²¹ See J. Pelikan, "Most Generations Will Call Me Blessed: An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Liturgy," in *Mary, Mother of God*, ed. C. E. Braaten and R. W. Jenson, 8.

²²² B. Escaffre Ladet, "Concepción virginal de Jesús en el evangelio de Juan," in A. Aparicio Rodríguez, *María del Evangelio* (Madrid: Publicaciones Claretianas, 1994), 341-361.

²²³ Ibid., 361.

If the choice in favor of the plural reading satisfies the requirements of the criteria of external criticism, it gives no satisfaction to content or internal criticism. Regard for the norms of textual criticism does not result in throwing the hoped-for light on the problem of triple negation.²²⁴ May it be added that the issue at hand seems to be of mainly European interest in the recent past. In sum, we are again faced with a problem that illustrates the indispensable complementarity between theological exegesis and textual criticism.

3. *Virgin, Disciple, Priest*

Is it possible to see a relation between Mary, virgin and disciple, and the question of a possible vow of virginity? The fundamental attitude of oblation, of openness and receptivity towards God, proper to the model disciple, may it be considered an existential disposition on which will be grafted, after the event of the Annunciation, a way of life that we call virginity? Some recent readings point in that direction, without saying so expressly.²²⁵ Several authors affirm or reaffirm the existence of a vow of virginity. B. Pixner suggests a convergence of meaning between Luke 1:34 and 11 Q Migd 53, 1654, 3 of Qumrân (which comments on Numbers 30:4-9) on the meaning of God's legitimation of a woman's vow of sexual abstinence.²²⁶ R. Laurentin goes back to Tradition: "That Mary had resolved to belong to God alone, by reason of an inspiration, is clearly attested by Luke 1:34."²²⁷ But is it a question of inspiration leading to intent or to an actual vow? I. de La Potterie does not wish to imply that Mary made a vow of virginity. According to him,

²²⁴ Ibid., 351-352.

²²⁵ See García Paredes, *Mariología*, 355: "There was no need for any vow of virginity. The charism of the virginal maternity was received by her as a program for her life;" Brown, *A Coming Christ in Advent: Essays on the Gospel Narratives Preparing for the Birth of Jesus, Matthew 1 and Luke 1* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1988), 62: "...so that what happens is not a response to her yearning [virginity!] but a surprise initiative by God ..."

²²⁶ See B. Pixner, "Maria im Hause Davids. Tempelrolle und Jungfauengeburt," *Geist und Leben* 64 (Jan./Feb. 1991): 42-43.

²²⁷ Laurentin, *Vie authentique de Jésus Christ*, 2:64-65.

Mary was penetrated by desire for virginity that will be fully respected by God.²²⁸ P. Guilbert does not seem to share the same opinion. He finds de La Potterie's proposal too involved and surprising: "The author seems to lend to Mary the 'secret desires' of his own Marian devotion."²²⁹ The general tenor recognizes the fact but seems to be hesitant to attribute firm intent leading to an actual vow.²³⁰

Is Mary-Virgin being replaced by Mary-Disciple? Not wishing to descend into some kind of simplistic generalization, we can point to the fact that a number of authors paint Mary's portrait at the Annunciation primarily as that of a disciple. C. Thomas examines the Gospel of Christmas from the angle of the vocation of a disciple, without entering into detail about the virgin birth.²³¹ Mary is the model disciple, R. Brown is pleased to underline,²³² for she is the first to hear, accept and proclaim the message of the angel.²³³ The idea of disciple is neither recent nor particularly Catholic. We find it in H. Räisänen, a Lutheran from Finland,²³⁴ in the USA ecumenical study on Mary in the New Testament,²³⁵ and in P.J. Bearsley as a new paradigm in Mariology.²³⁶ The importance given to the role of a disciple should not do away with the reality of virginity.²³⁷ On the contrary, Mary's role as first disciple can and should enrich the first and spiritual dimension of her virginity, that is, her faith.

²²⁸ See I. de La Potterie, "La concezione verginale di Cristo," in *Atti di Capua* (1992), I:203, n. 60.

²²⁹ P. Guilbert, *Marie des Écritures* (Paris: Nouvelle Cité, 1995), 135.

²³⁰ James R. White, *Mary: Another Redeemer?*, 29-31.

²³¹ C. Thomas, "The Nativity Scene," *Bible Today* 28/1 (January 1990): 26-34.

²³² R. Brown, *A Coming Christ in Advent*, 60 ff.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ H. Räisänen, *Die Mutter Jesu im Neuen Testament* (Helsinki, 1989²).

²³⁵ *Mary in the New Testament*, ed. R. Brown et al.

²³⁶ P.J. Bearsley, "Mary the Perfect Disciple: A Paradigm for Mariology," *Theological Studies* 41 (1980): 461-504. See also X. Pikaza "El Espíritu Santo y María en la obra de San Lucas," *Ephemerides Mariologicae* 28 (1978): 239-258.

²³⁷ See J.A. Grassi, *Mary, Mother and Disciple: From the Scriptures to the Council of Ephesus* (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1988). U. Casale, *Benedetta fra le Donne* (Leumann: Editrice Elle Di Ci, 1989), 60; J. M. Hernandez Martinez, "La madre de Jesus, la primera creyente," *Ephemerides Mariologicae* 34 (1984): 239-258.

Here and there efforts can be noticed to create a closer link between Mary and the ordination of women. Can we see in Mary a Virgin-Priest? In Mary's maternal priesthood, T. Beattie sees the rehabilitation of maternal flesh. Its basis is virginity, which indicates a breaking away from identifying a woman's body with sexual violence.²³⁸ N. Baumert likewise calls attention to the mariological aspect of a feminine priesthood. In the order of the Redemption, it is the woman who brings a man into the world. Here it is Mary, the Virgin, who is the true mediatrix of the new life—in an outcome that transcends the biological order—a mediatrix of and for the “head” of the definitive creation.²³⁹ W. Beinert, without referring to the virginity directly, calls to mind the parallelism between priesthood and divine maternity as found in Scheeben and a similar reflection in *Redemptoris Mater* (nos. 27, 39).²⁴⁰ Are we to expect a resurgence of this theme following upon a renewal of interest in the co-redemption?²⁴¹

VI. CHRISTOLOGICAL HESITATIONS

Among the important features in current Christology, we find a greater insistence on the soteriological aspect, a more evident desire to go beyond the dichotomy between speculative Christology and Christocentric spirituality, a re-examination of the paradigms of ascending and/or descending Christology, and a certain falling off of talk about the historical Christ. Furthermore, Christology must face the difficult problem of Jesus and the world religions, and on the other hand, the growing number of portraits of Jesus arising from present-day cultural mentality.²⁴² At the same time, there exists a strong tendency

²³⁸ T. Beattie, “Mary, the Virgin Priest?” *The Month* (Dec. 1996): 492.

²³⁹ See W. Beinert, *Frauenordination. Stand der Diskussion in der katholischen Kirche*, ed. W. Gross (München: E. Wewel-Verlag, 1996), 77.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁴¹ To view the treatment of this theme in the past, see: M. P. Pourat, “Marie et le sacerdoce,” in *Maria. Études sur la Sainte Vierge*, ed. H. Du Manoir (8 vols., Paris: Beauchesne, 1949), 1:802/803.

²⁴² See P. G. Müller, “Zur Aktualität der christologischen Frage,” in *Bibel und Christologie. Ein Dokument der Päpstlichen Bibelkommission in Französisch und Latein*, ed. J. A. Fitzmeyer (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1987), 258-323; B. Sesboué, *Jésus Christ à l'image des hommes* (Paris: Desclée, 1997²), 105-219.

to limit Christology to its most palpable elements and events. A number of studies specialize in high profile Christology, the years of Jesus' public ministry and the post-paschal retrospective of the disciples. But why ignore or avoid the two pillars of meaningful Christology, Incarnation (pre-existence and virginal conception and birth) and Redemption (resurrection). The answer is frequently to be found in a self-imposed positivism where science seeks science and no longer faith.²⁴³

What is the place of the Marian thematic in recent essays on the person and work of Christ?²⁴⁴ We are inclined to answer with A. Amato: "Where we find the greatest Christological fullness, we also find the greatest Mariological fullness and vice versa. . . ."²⁴⁵ P. Hünemann, while arguing from Scripture and tradition in formulating his Christology, touches upon the Marian theme but lightly and without seeking out Mary the Virgin. Why? As mentioned, his work represents a Christological perspective based on the mission of Christ and related themes: reference to the Father, death and resurrection. The Incarnation is considered in a generic way as an auto-manifestation of God.²⁴⁶

²⁴³ See *Relativierung der Wahrheit? Kontextuelle Christologie auf dem Prüfstand*, ed. R. Schwager, Quaestiones Disputatae 170 (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1998).

²⁴⁴ A useful overview of Mary's presence in mostly classical and Latin authors, organized according to tendencies and models, can be found in Mario Masini, "Percorsi di mariologia nella cristologia contemporanea," *Marianum* 64 (2002): 251-346.

²⁴⁵ A. Amato, "Rassegna delle principali Cristologie contemporanee nelle loro implicazioni mariologiche il mondo cattolico," in *Il Salvatore e la Vergine-Madre, Atti del 3o Simposio Mariologico-Internazionale (Roma, ottobre 1980)* (Rome: Marianum, 1981), 112.

²⁴⁶ P. Hünemann, *Jesus Christus: Gottes Wort in der Zeit. Eine systematische Christologie* (Münster: Aschendorf, 1994). We find the same post-Paschal concentration in M. Serentha, *Gesù Cristo Ieri, oggi e sempre* (Torino: Elle Di Ci, 1991); P. Schoonenberg, *Der Geist, das Wort und der Sohn. Eine Geist-Christologie* (Regensburg: Pustet, 1994), 27: "Here there is no question of a Mariological optic but a Christological one." The trend continues with Christopher M. Tuckett, *Christology and the New Testament: Jesus and His Earliest Followers* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), and James F. McGrath, *John's Apologetic Christology: Legitimation and Development in Johannine Christology* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001). The same omission occurs in V.-M. Kärkäinen's broad-stroke presentation of the biblical foundation, historical development, and twenty christologies beginning with

R. Haight, advocate of a pneumatological Christology like Moltmann and Schoonenberg, runs a similar risk by reducing the Incarnation to a negligible appendage of Christ-Spirit.²⁴⁷ Nevertheless, wherever it is discussed, this soteriological concentration can have a sure hold on our understanding of the virginal conception. Recent Christologies that speak of the figure of Mary-Virgin prefer to see her from a retroactive perspective, that is, based on a post-Resurrection faith. In other words, it is the experience of the Resurrection that leads to an understanding of pre-existence and, thanks to that, to a formulation of the virginal conception.²⁴⁸ Exceptions are not unheard of, as in Doré's (et al.) *Christology* where the concentration on the paschal event and the history of Christology takes the discourse away from the thematic of Virginity.²⁴⁹

Placed between dogma and contemporary exegesis, Christology sometimes finds itself in an uncomfortable situation that can be reflected in ambiguous statements, for example, when S. Mitchell affirms: "No good scholar . . . would call the Christmas stories anything but legends."²⁵⁰ Although more sophisticated, we find similar misgivings in E. Johnson and

K. Barth and ending with Stanley Samartha. See Veli-Matti Kärkäinen, *Christology: A Global Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003).

²⁴⁷ R. Haight, "The Case for Spirit Christology," *Theological Studies* 53 (1992): 257-287. Quo Vadis, R. Haight? The question would appear legitimate entering the somewhat chiffreed cosmos of his *Jesus Symbol of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999) and his more recent *The Future of Christology* (New York/London: Continuum, 2005), 181ff.

²⁴⁸ Criticized by a number of authors, such as Freitas Ferreira, Muñoz Iglesias, and Laurentin, we first find this mode of interpretation in R. Brown (see the reference at the beginning and the discussion in *The Birth of the Messiah*, 1993², 708 ff.); cf. also J. D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989²), 256; O. Battaglia, *La Madre del mio Signore. Maria nei vangeli di Luca e di Giovanni* (Assisi: Cittadella, 1994), 27. On the other hand, we must put a question mark behind the observation of K. J. Kuschel: "Where statements about pre-existence appear, the notion of the Virgin birth is absent," and *vice versa*, in his *Born before All Time: The Dispute over Christ's Origin* (New York: Crossroads, 1992), 318.

²⁴⁹ Joseph Doré et al., *Christologie* (Paris: Cerf, 2003).

²⁵⁰ S. Mitchell, *The Gospel according to Jesus* (New York: Harper/Collins, 1991), 8-9.

J. Sobrino,²⁵¹ and a certain irritation is perceptible when J. P. Meier presents the meager results of his research on the virginal conception.²⁵² Beset by the same difficulties, B. O. McDermott raises the question of the reformability of this teaching by the Church's (ordinary!) Magisterium.²⁵³ What is common to these writers is the double conditioning by historical-critical exegesis and the demands of contemporary culture. It is therefore not too surprising that some voices are raised demanding a major adjustment in order to be better able to confront relativistic historicism.²⁵⁴

The Christology of F. O'Collins²⁵⁵ succeeds in balancing these different aspects and offers us an illustration of the pre-existence of Jesus based on the twofold foundation of the intervention of the Holy Spirit and the virginal conception and birth.²⁵⁶ Kereszty, in giving space to the "beginning of the Gospel," pays due attention to the thematic of virginity, a consequence not least of his critical evaluation of the "liberal quest" and the "new quest for the historical Jesus."²⁵⁷ Sesboüé detects a new form of docetism in the widespread hesitation

²⁵¹ E. Johnson, *Consider Jesus* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 19-35; J. Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 61.

²⁵² John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Retbinking the Historical Jesus* (4 vols., New York: Doubleday, 1991), 1:22: "The end result of this survey must remain meager and disappointing to both defenders and opponents of the doctrine of the virginal conception."

²⁵³ B. O. McDermott, *Word Become Flesh: Dimensions of Christology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), 209-211.

²⁵⁴ R. Haight, "The Situation of Christology Today," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 69 (Dec. 1993): 327ff; McDermott, *Word Become Flesh*, 210.

²⁵⁵ G. O'Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical and Systematic Study of Jesus* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), 273-278; see also in general J. Dupuis, *Who Do You Say I Am? Introduction to Christology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994). O'Collins' thought regarding Mary's virginal character is even more sharply articulated in his *Incarnation*, New Century Theology (London/New York: Continuum, 2002), 99ff.

²⁵⁶ See also, for something more theological, D. J. Goergen, *Jesus, Son of God, Son of Mary; Immanuel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995).

²⁵⁷ R. A. Kereszty, *Jesus Christ: Fundamentals of Christology* (New York: Alba House, 2002).

regarding the virginal conception of Jesus.²⁵⁸ Battaglia devotes a whole chapter of his Christology to Mary's place in the economy of salvation and its historical beginnings and consequences. He thus creates the elsewhere much-missed link between Christology and Mariology.²⁵⁹ Other authors turn resolutely towards a biblical Christology in order to recover the original kerygmatic interest of the primitive Church²⁶⁰ concerned with the unity between the Jesus of history and the Jesus of faith. Schnackenburg insists above all on the theological dimension of the virginal conception.²⁶¹ There is often an implicit unanimity in refraining from a "biological curiosity" even when perpetual virginity has not been explicitly articulated.²⁶²

Many of the recent writings on Jesus Christ are based on a close correlation between the historical Jesus and the historical condition of contemporary man. This has led and leads to "wildly divergent portraits" of Jesus, from the romantic visionary (Renan) to the gay magician (Smith) and guru of oceanic bliss (Mitchell). According to J. D. Crossan "the common element seems still to be the ideal self-image of the researcher."²⁶³ It is not surprising that within this parameter there has not

²⁵⁸ B. Sesboué, *Jésus-Christ dans la tradition de l'Église* (Paris: Desclée, 2000), 66ff.

²⁵⁹ V. Battaglia, *Gesù Cristo, luce del mondo* (Rome: Antonianum, 2007), 389-410.

²⁶⁰ R. Schnackenburg, *Die Person Jesu Christi im Spiegel der vier Evangelien* (Freiburg: Herder, 1993; Eng. version, 1995), 14-15.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 75, 337 (1 & 2). Along the lines of Schnackenburg, see C. Stephen Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Christ of Faith: The Incarnational Narrative as History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). The author proposes a return to the "incarnational narrative" and then also to the affirmation of the divinity of Christ without spending too much time on the virginal conception. Recourse to biblical Christology is no security against short-shrifting the incarnation and its corollaries. See M. Hogan, *Seeking Jesus of Nazareth: An Introduction to the Christology of the Four Gospels* (Dublin: Columbia Press, 2001).

²⁶² Cf. E. Ocariz Braña, L. E. Mateo Seco, and J. A. Riesta, *The Mystery of Jesus Christ: A Christology and Soteriology Textbook* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1994; Span. original, 1991), 63, n. 46.

²⁶³ J. D. Crossan et al., *The Jesus Controversy: Perspectives in Conflict* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 71-72.

often been any or, at any rate, little room for the theme of Mary-Virgin; the ordinary human condition knows nothing of such a distinction. In fact the correlation when mentioned is often unsatisfactory. That correlation favors the human condition more than it respects the opposite pole, that is, the person and work of Christ.²⁶⁴

There are works that structurally impede any treatment of the virginal conception.²⁶⁵ A wisdom Christology tends to be silent about incarnational realism but embraces a cosmic dimension and "opens ... to the world-process"²⁶⁶; a "view from the victims" will have a similar effect as it centers on "Christ the liberator."²⁶⁷ Centering on the "essential Jesus," is it enough to target as "first essential" his intimate connection with the source, his Father, and so be "fully charged with Divine Energy?"²⁶⁸ Or why would a metaphysical treatment of the Incarnation lead to the conclusion that "the Virgin Birth is wholly extrinsic to the doctrine of the Incarnation?"²⁶⁹ And there is Benedict XVI's

²⁶⁴ Cf. S. Cowdell, *Is Jesus Unique? A Study of Recent Christology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 286. A variety of perspectives point to this or similar conclusions, all of them void of any reference to our thematic. Here are some examples: M. Abdul-Masih, Edward Schillebeeckx, and Hans Frei, *A Conversation on Method and Christology* (Waterloo, CA: W. Laurier University Press, 2001); D. B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 143ff. C. Marsh, *Christ in Practice: A Christology in Everyday Life* (London: Darton, Longman, Todd, 2006). A. van Aarde, *Fatherless in Galilee: Jesus as Child of God* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001): Jesus, the fatherless child, finds himself in a twisted bind being without a real father, a "child of God," but still the product of Bultmannian mythologizing.

²⁶⁵ Cf. A. Gounelle, "Trois christologies," *Études théologiques et religieuses* 2 (1990): 247-259. The author uses a schema centered on Christ, not so much as one who has the truth or reveals the truth, but as a way, fully in a Buddhist sense.

²⁶⁶ A. O'Boyle, *Toward a Contemporary Wisdom Christology: Some Catholic Christologies in German, English and French (1965-1995)*, Tesi Gregoriana, Serie Teologia 98 (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2003), 305.

²⁶⁷ J. Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 172 ff.

²⁶⁸ C. H. Abesamis, "The Essential Jesus," in *Asian Faces of Christ*, ed. V. Tirimanna, OTC Theological Colloquium (Bangalore: Asian Trading Co., 2005), 22-24.

²⁶⁹ R. Cross, *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation: Thomas Aquinas to Duns Scotus* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 324.

segmented "Christology": a Christology beginning at the baptism and leading up to Christ's transfiguration.²⁷⁰

Certain lives of Jesus set out deliberately to convey a historical-critical exegesis that is in fact popularized and ambiguous,²⁷¹ or to propound a depth psychology that would present a Jesus who is a perfect reflection of ourselves.²⁷² Is he the Son of God? Yes, he is son of God, just like any one of us; apart from that, he is son of Joseph and Mary.²⁷³ Historical and psychological popularizing easily turns into a historical novel, sometimes making use of the apocryphal gospels (the Proto-Gospel of James) in order to support miracles such as the virginal conception and birth.²⁷⁴ Most of these works appeal more or less explicitly to science,²⁷⁵ either exegetical or other, and are sold thanks to this learned flavoring concocted from a fictionalized account and pseudo-science. Their contribution to the question of virginity is either null, ambiguous or negative—in that order! The same is true for the Christ of the various sects, very frequently of a gnostic persuasion or involved in a cycle of reincarnation giving all its adherents the possibility of being the reincarnation of another Christ.²⁷⁶ Should other "incarnations" besides that of Jesus be recognized? The discourse on religious

²⁷⁰ *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (New York: Doubleday, 2007).

²⁷¹ Cf. J. Duquesne, *Jésus* (Paris: Flammarion, 1994).

²⁷² EAlt, *Jesus—der erste neue Mann* (8th ed., München: Piper, 1991).

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁷⁴ Cf. G. Messadieu, *L'homme qui devient Dieu* (Paris: R. Laffont, 1988), followed by a second volume, titled *Sources*, in 1989. *Vie authentique de Jésus Christ* (1996), by R. Laurentin, echoes this approach by contrasting it. Not to be forgotten are the fictional works by Anne Rice, with more theological content and accuracy than some christologies. See, e.g., *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt: A Novel* (New York: Knopf, 2005) and *Christ the Lord: The Road to Cana: A Novel* (New York: Knopf, 2008).

²⁷⁵ The range is vast. It goes from a respected author such as J. D. Crossant, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991) to such fantastic works as the book by B. Mack, *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and the Christian Origins* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), while moving through such authors as M. Borg, A. N. Wilson, and S. Mitchell.

²⁷⁶ Cf. *Les sectes et l'Église catholique. Le document romain*, Introduction by Jean Vernet (Paris: Cerf, 1986), 104ff. Enlightening in this regard is the great variety of interpretations of Jesus' humanity among non-Catholic confessions and sects, from

pluralism remains non-committal as to the realism of the Incarnation. Argues one author: "... a consciousness of pluralism in the future may judge that restricting divinity to Jesus would be unfaithful to the revelation of God mediated by him."²⁷⁷ In contrast, switching from divinity to humanity, even most recent recapitulations—a hefty work auscultating the nooks and crannies of the historical Jesus—do not seem to be able to surface noteworthy information on the incarnation, the virgin birth, and Mary, his virginal mother.²⁷⁸

It is then a fortunate thing when we can present works that soundly direct the reader²⁷⁹ or deepen one's faith in the Incarnation.²⁸⁰ From contemporary Christology we look for "some grounds for hope and empowerment to life within history."²⁸¹ Mary's virginity (under all its aspects) is an important factor to awaken and to have this hope and confidence in life increase. In delivering its essentially trans-historic message, virginity makes us attentive not only to the eschatological horizon of human existence, but also to the importance of witnessing to the very reason for every hope and confidence in life.

VII. ECUMENICAL CONSONANCE

The ecumenical scene has dramatically changed over the years. Notion and content have literally exploded. The overall tenor is less controversial; buzzwords frequently heard are

Jehovah's Witnesses to the Word-Faith Movement. See Steven Tsoukalas, *Knowing Christ in the Challenge of Heresy: A Christology of the Cults, a Christology of the Bible* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1999).

²⁷⁷ Anne M. Clifford and Anthony J. Godzieta, eds., *Christology: Memory, Inquiry, Practice*, Annual Publication of the College Theology Society (2002), 48 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, c2003), 59.

²⁷⁸ Craig S. Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publ. Co., 2009).

²⁷⁹ B. Sesboué, *Pédagogie du Christ* (Paris: Cerf, 1994), 203-219; G. L. Müller, *Katbolische Dogmatik für Studium und Praxis der Theologie* (Freiburg: Herder, 2003), 308-320.

²⁸⁰ E. Quéré, *Jésus Enfant*, Collection "Jésus et Jésus-Christ," 55 (Paris: Desclée, 1992); Leo Scheffczyk and Anton Ziegenaus, eds., *Katbolische Dogmatik, 4: Jesus Christus—Die Fülle des Heils* (Aachen: M. M. Verlag, 2000).

²⁸¹ R. Haight, "The Situation of Christology Today," 334.

"consonance," "rediscovery," and *rapprochement*. Ecumenism covers a vast field of application. It touches on not only inter-confessional dialogue but also on interreligious exchanges and by that very fact on the history of religions and cultural anthropology. Here we will limit ourselves to ecumenical aspects properly so-called.

Orthodox teaching has always been steadfast on all aspects of Mary's virginity. Orthodox tradition not only identifies itself with the Ever-Virgin²⁸² but also demands of the Catholic Church a more resolute affirmation of the "necessarily virginal" motherhood of the Theotokos because of its Christological and soteriological implications.²⁸³

We notice a major shift in the Protestant tradition. A steadily increasing interest in Mary in recent decades seems to move away from the classical liberal creed on the virginity. One major reason for this noticeable change may be the importance given to a theological reading of the virginity. There may also be a reappraisal of Barthian theology in course, but the more recent grandees of Protestant theology are still very present.²⁸⁴ The great Protestant theologians of recent past, W. Pannenberg and J. Moltmann, remain within the line of classical or liberal Protestantism. Primarily, they affirm the birth of Jesus by the Spirit of God and consider the virgin birth as legendary. For Pannenberg,²⁸⁵ there is nothing that allows us to state that Mary was a virgin after the conception and birth of Jesus. Since the Infancy Gospels are of legendary character, the details of

²⁸² "Touchstone of the true faith and a distinctive mark of Orthodoxy" —G. Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, Collected Works of Georges Florovsky, 3 (Belmont, MA: Nordland Pub. Co., 1976), 171.

²⁸³ A. Kniazeff, *La madre di Dio nella Chiesa ortodossa* (Cinisello Balsamo: Ediz. San Paolo, 1993), 95-103, 135-138.

²⁸⁴ See, e.g., Kathryn Greene-McCreight, "Mother of God: How Mary Tells the Story," in Skye Fackre Gibson, *Story Lines: Chapters on Thought, Word and Deed* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 53-61. The author understands virginity as absolute initiative and power of God. In typical Barthian fashion, the author argues that the "capacity of the creature for God is simply not a possibility" (ibid., 59, referring to CD 1, 2, 188).

²⁸⁵ W. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 318.

the Incarnation can only be interpreted in a Christological optic of pre-existence and not as isolated facts. The historicity of the first chapters of Luke and Matthew has really no standing. What does count is the historical reality of the Resurrection. Moltmann²⁸⁶ also represents a certain Protestant minimalism and subjects the revealed fact to his pneumatological Christology. For him the doctrine of the virginal conception is not a pillar that sustains the teaching of the New Testament on the Incarnation: "The profession of faith in Jesus, Son of God and Savior is independent of the virginal birth and is not founded thereon."²⁸⁷ It is the Spirit who "becomes the virginal virgin mother (who gives life) of all the living, the divine archetype of Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ."²⁸⁸ According to Moltmann we must abandon the unfortunate discourse about the virgin birth in order to speak instead of the spiritual birth of Jesus.²⁸⁹

The Anglican John MacQuarrie, whose little book of Mary achieved prominence,²⁹⁰ insists on the theological priority to be given to the virginal conception. The birth of Jesus is a redemptive act of God, the creation of a new humanity or the recreation of a veritable humanity. The author refers especially to John 1:12-13 (reading in the plural!), which theologically echoes the Infancy Gospels of Luke and Matthew. In these last, the virginal birth has been universalized and allegorized. The characterization of Jesus as Son of God from his conception and birth has been—alas—mythologized and literally comprised more than it should have been.²⁹¹ The names mentioned here are representative of a given period claiming modernity, its intellectual purism and spiritual abstinence. We are dealing

²⁸⁶ J. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1990).

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 79.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 84.

²⁸⁹ J. Moltmann, "Gibt es eine oekumenische Mariologie?" in *Was gibt uns Maria an?* ed. E. Moltmann-Wendel et al. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1988), 14-22.

²⁹⁰ J. MacQuarrie, *Mary for All Christians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991).

²⁹¹ J. MacQuarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought* (London: SCM Press, 1990), 93 and 115.

with a period that reacts nervously in front of anything that does not evidence the quality label of strict historicity.

Protestant popularization of good quality remains generally explicit in its rejection of the virginity *in partu*. R. Longenecker rejects the Catholic point of view declaring that the Catholic speculations on the subject of the hymen and of the perpetual virginity were not only extra-biblical but even anti-biblical.²⁹² Maria Sybilla Heister,²⁹³ in the late eighties, expresses herself still more clearly. The *Natus ex Maria Virgine* being exegetically very unlikely, the author opts for a normal marriage. Jesus is the son of Joseph and Mary. The virginity is a myth that raises the Virgin Mother to the rank of a goddess (divine domain). One is forced to conclude that we can speak of Jesus only in faith. Reactions against the virgin birth and perpetual virginity may even indulge venom and aggressiveness. For Gerd Lüdemann the birth of Jesus from a Virgin is a masquerade; scholars such as Brown, Fitzmyer and Meier are "simply apologists, whom one cannot trust to point the way." Today "mariology has gone beyond all bounds," people "destroyed everything which at that time (at the beginning of Christianity!) was a bitter fact in order to be able to worship Jesus and Mary." Theology left the basis of history and "built one castle in the air after another."²⁹⁴

In this country not so long ago a fierce controversy ignited between Protestant fundamentalists (James Tolle, John Ankerberg/J. Weldon, Paul G. Schrottenboer, Elliot Miller/Kenneth Sampas)²⁹⁵ and a certain Catholicism on the subject of

²⁹² "Whose Child Is This," *Christianity Today* 34 (Dec. 17, 1990): 25-28.

²⁹³ M. S. Heister, *Maria aus Nazareth* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987), 30-31.

²⁹⁴ G. Lüdemann, *Virgin Birth? The Real Story of Mary and Her Son Jesus*, trans. from the German by John Bowden (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 141, 148-149.

²⁹⁵ J. Tolle, *Mary ... Fact and Fiction* (San Fernando, CA: Alexander Street Church of Christ, n.d.), 2; J. Ankerberg and J. Weldon, *The Facts on Roman Catholicism* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publ., 1993), 41; P. G. Schrottenboer, *Roman Catholicism: A Contemporary Evangelical Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988, c1987), 38; E. Miller and K. R. Samples, *The Cult of the Virgin: Catholic Mariology and the Apparitions of Mary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992), 26-28.

Mary (Father Mateo, Robert Payesko, Karl Keating).²⁹⁶ In sum, Protestant fundamentalism rejects the perpetual virginity but accepts the virginal conception.

A more positive Protestant attitude respecting the virginity of Mary can be detected when there is question of combating deism²⁹⁷ and feminism.²⁹⁸ In the first case, there is question of recognizing divine operations within the context of the natural world and, in the second case, rejection applies to a unilateral interpretation of Mary's virginity in the sense of women's autonomy. Examining the literature of the past decade we discover indetermination and hesitation,²⁹⁹ the quest for higher grounds in common adoration³⁰⁰ but also a growing receptiveness of the theological and spiritual significance of Mary's virginity in its various facets, especially as perpetual virginity. In the course of these developments, the focus shifts from virginity as an expression of asceticism to an attitude of receptive simplicity, from "miraculous biological phenomenon" to "sign of salvation history" and "Word (*rhema* of God," from a consideration about the marital status of the holy couple to a matter of spirituality.³⁰¹ At the same time the dialog between Catholics and Protestants adopted a more relaxed and even humorous tone.³⁰²

²⁹⁶ Father Mateo (pseud.), *Refuting the Attack on Mary: A Defense of Marian Doctrines* (San Diego: Catholic Answers, 1993); R. Payesko, *The Truth about Mary: A Scriptural Introduction to the Mother of Jesus for Bible-believing Christians*, 3 vols. (Santa Barbara, CA: Queenship Pub., 1996), 3:124-142; K. Keating, *Catholicism and Fundamentalism: The Attack on "Romanism" by "Bible Christians"* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 282-289.

²⁹⁷ C. Dickson, *A Protestant Pastor Looks at Mary* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1996), 59.

²⁹⁸ W. Schlichting, *Maria. Die Mutter Jesu in Bibel, Tradition, und Feminismus* (Wuppertal: Zürich Brockhaus, 1989), 23-25.

²⁹⁹ W. J. Bridcut, "Did Mary Remain a Virgin?" *Churchman* 3/1 (1997): 52.

³⁰⁰ Paul W. Thomas, "The Virginal Conception," *Expository Times* 107/1 (1995): 14.

³⁰¹ H. Gerland, *Meine Seele erhebt den Herrn. Eine evangelische Pilgerreise zu Maria. Evangelische Verlagsanstalt* (Leipzig, 2007), 40-41.

³⁰² See, e.g., D. Longenecker and D. Gustafson, *Mary: A Catholic-Evangelical Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003), 60/61 and 76-78.

The sea change (not exactly “Full fathom five”!) in ecumenical dialog, as announced at the outset of this section, owes its origin and expression in large part to recent ecumenical statements. Three of them deserve special attention: the document of the Groupe des Dombes (1997-98), the Fifth ARCIC statement (2005), and the 2009 conclusions of the dialog between Evangelicals and Catholics.

The document by the Groupe des Dombes which presents an ecumenical reading on Mary from history and Scripture in the plan of God and in the communion of saints³⁰³ takes a very cautious position respecting the virginity *in partu* (“this birth is not a myth”!) and *post partum*. The text is, in fact, ambivalent. It allows for an interpretation that goes in the direction of acceptance and also towards rejection. It is in the second volume on “controverses et conversions” that we find an invitation to conversion on the issue of perpetual virginity addressed to both Protestants and Catholics. Is the fact that “many Protestants do not accept the perpetual virginity of Mary” an obstacle to communion in the “same baptismal and eucharistic church?” The answer given asks for greater in-depth dialog.³⁰⁴ Protestants, on the other hand, expressing respect for a common theological tradition before the confessional separation, confirm their belief—in spite of difficulties with regard to *virginitas post partum*—in Mary as the “*virgin par excellence*,” a title “due to her because of the virginal conception of Jesus.”³⁰⁵ We may have here an example of how the principle of the hierarchy of truths—a leading principle in the elaboration of the document!—comes into play: the lesser (perpetual virginity) subsumed and justified by the primary signifier (virginal

³⁰³ Cf. “Document du Groupe des Dombes. Marie dans le dessein de Dieu et la Communion des Saints,” *La Documentation catholique* 79/15 (August 1997): 721-749. See esp. nos. 127, 150, 151, 164, and 165 for the points that interest us. The text by the Groupe des Dombes was published by Bayard Editions/Centurion, 1997 (103 pp.). It was followed in 1998 by a second slim volume, *Marie. Controverse et conversion* (Paris: Bayard Editions/Centurion, 1998; 99 pp.).

³⁰⁴ See *Marie. Controverse et conversion*, nos. 301 and 302.

³⁰⁵ See *Marie. Controverse et conversion*, no. 327.

conception).³⁰⁶ Still, Joseph Famerée raises this question about the protestant statement respecting perpetual virginity: "Should the Group not have been more challenging of Protestants on the point? . . . After the apostolic period, does the patristic church still play a normative role for the Reformation? Indeed, can Scripture be interpreted outside the common ecclesial tradition?"³⁰⁷ B. Sesboüé in a presentation of the Dombes document reminds his readers that in an attempt of an "honest *status quaestionis*" the statement makes a clear distinction between history and exegesis, on the one hand, and the domain of faith. The latter consideration may explain why some Protestants argue that "l'affirmation de la virginité perpétuelle de Marie pourrait garder un sens spirituel à ne pas écarter" (no. 233).³⁰⁸

The fifth ARCIC document, entitled *Mary, Grace and Hope in Christ*,³⁰⁹ weighs heavily on theological considerations in evaluating the various elements of Mary's virginity. The conclusion drawn about the virginal conception states that "far from being an isolated miracle, [it] is a powerful expression of what the church believes about her Lord, and about our salvation" (para. 18). In similar fashion, perpetual virginity is not only understood by the Fathers as physical integrity, but also "as an interior disposition of openness, obedience, and a single-hearted fidelity to Christ" (para. 37). Although the general conclusions do not articulate Mary's virginity (para. 76-80), they are indicative in a generic sense of "different ways of understanding Scripture and tradition [drawn] into a new relationship of consonance, in which truth about the revelation of God

³⁰⁶ For the importance of the principle of the hierarchy of truths, see A. González Montes, "Prologo para una lectura catolica y ecumenica del acuerdo sobre María del Grupo de les Dombes," *Dialogo Ecumenico* 35/113 (2000): 408.

³⁰⁷ J. Famerée, "Mary in God's Plan and among the Saints," *Theology Digest* 47/3 (Fall 2000): 250/251.

³⁰⁸ B. Sesboüé, "Marie dans le dessein de Dieu et la Communion des Saints. Présentation du document du Groupe des Dombes," in *Parler de Marie, d'bier à aujourd'hui. Actes du 4e congrès de l'École française de spiritualité [2003]*, ed. P. Daviau (Ottawa: Novalis/Bayard, 2004), 140.

³⁰⁹ *Mary, Grace and Hope in Christ: Fifth Agreed Statement of the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission* (London/New York: Continuum, 2005; 96 pp.).

in Christ can be received.”³¹⁰ The attempt to safeguard Mary’s perpetual virginity in spite of Scriptural indetermination surfaces in some commentaries of the fifth ARCIC document and confirms the spirit of consonance: “Since Mary functions as Virgin Mother of the Messiah in the order of Salvation history, she can be said to be ‘always a virgin’ even if she had other children in the normal way. For, salvation history, while related to ordinary history, nevertheless also transcends it.”³¹¹ This evident sign of “going the extra mile” somehow reminds of the second half of a well-known Latin proverb, “Sit pro ratione voluntas.”

The most recent statement of Evangelicals and Catholics³¹² is a good example of this new and irenic tone of dialogue seeking consonance. Thematizing Mary’s perpetual virginity, the statement on this issue concludes that “some Evangelicals may refer to Mary as ever-virgin, but all acclaim her as blessed because as a virgin she carried the Redeemer in her womb.” Perpetual virginity is an adiaphorous teaching, “neither required nor forbidden by Scripture itself.” The theological meaning is not questioned: “We may regard Mary’s virginity as an example of her fidelity to the unique calling she received to become the mother of Jesus. . . .” To what extent Mary’s physical virginity remained intact in and after the birth of Jesus, Scripture does not say, but the statement admits to a range of meanings of the word *adelphoi*, referring possibly to Jesus’ “close relatives, either cousins or the children of Joseph by a previous marriage.” There exists unanimity as to the “virgin birth” stated in

³¹⁰ M. Warner, “Mary, Grace and Hope in Christ: A New Understanding of Scripture and Tradition?” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 5/3 (October 2005): 266.

³¹¹ J. Muddiman and A. Denaux, “Exegetical Note on the ‘Perpetual Virginity’ of the Blessed Virgin Mary,” in *Studying Mary: The Virgin Mary in Anglican and Roman Catholic Theology and Devotion*, ed. A. Denaux and N. Sagovsky (London: T. and T. Clark, 2007), 3.

³¹² “Do Whatever He Tells You: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Christian Faith and Life,” *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life*, Issue 197 (November 2009): 49-58, esp. 55-56.

the document as "truth of biblical revelation": "Mary conceived and gave birth to a baby named Jesus without the sexual involvement of a male partner." This text is like an amplified version of Tim Perry's articulation of virginity, especially perpetual virginity, which—as the author admits—may sound "provocative to Evangelicals."³¹³ Foregoing arbitrage on brothers and sisters, Perry highlights the reasons in favor of Mary's perpetual virginity: (1) the practical consequence derived from John 19:26-27 (non-existence of immediate family!), (2) the uniqueness of Jesus as "most powerful support of all three aspects of Mary's virginity," and (3) Mary's virginity as the "ultimate and exemplary expression of the church's essential character."³¹⁴ The significance of the virgin birth holds in the following crisp formulation: "... virginal conception signifies that, from the first instance of his existence, Jesus of Nazareth stood in a unique relationship to God (understood best in terms of divine sonship) and in a unique relationship to the rest of us (understood best in terms of freedom from sin)."³¹⁵

Blanchard sees in these dialogs and statements a "rehabilitation" of mariology overcoming the long-cultivated identity as divide among Christian confessions. According to the same author, rehabilitation of mariology can be identified in its "structural link" to Christology and the "transversal function" affecting ecclesiology, soteriology, and Christian anthropology.³¹⁶ Whatever the exact meaning of "rehabilitation" may be, it should be added that for some time now both German and American exegetes, in a special way, have promoted a Marian discourse that takes the ecumenical dimension into account.³¹⁷

A short note may be added here with highlights on virginity in Islam and Jewish tradition. As for the Muslim religion, it is

³¹³ T. Perry, *Mary for Evangelicals* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 11.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 282-284.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 280.

³¹⁶ Y.-M. Blanchard, "Les enjeux théologiques de la mariologie: Perspectives œcuméniques," *Istina* 50 (2005): 227-228.

³¹⁷ See J. Zmijewski, *Die Mutter des Messias*, 167-168.

often invoked as witnessing to the virginal conception of Jesus.³¹⁸ The Koran, used perhaps sometimes as anti-semitic polemic, is in earnest to underline the virginity of Mary at the time of the conception and of the birth of her son.³¹⁹ As a corollary, it is not without interest to point out recent Jewish and Judaizing literature with respect to virginal conception and birth. Today it is good form and desirable to see Jesus and Mary in a Jewish context. Two recent studies establish a connection (already recognized) between Jesus and Moses. Allan Kensky establishes numerous connections between the two persons, but points out a notable difference: the divine conception is absent from the *midrashim* recounting the birth of Moses. These last take account of divine assistance but not of a divine generation. Roger David Aus suggests that according to rabbinic tradition the motive of virginity was transposed from Jochebed (mother of Moses) to Mary. At the age of 120 years, Jochebed is called daughter of Levi, that is, a virgin. On the occasion of her marriage with Amram, her virginity was miraculously restored, to be like that of a girl of twelve years.³²⁰

In conclusion to this section, we may prudently suggest that the post-Enlightenment skepticism about the virginity of Mary is on the wane. The territory it vacates may not be exactly staked out yet, but it has indeed given room to consonance and a new "terrain d'entente" which may be labeled as spiritual and theological. The reason for this development may well be, in the words of Brian Daley, "not the narrowness or lack of courage, but a deep underlying instinct for the reality of God."³²¹

³¹⁸ See, e.g., G. Madore, *Marie, un nouveau regard* ([Saint-Laurent, Quebec]: Fides, 1997), 75-76; G. Tavard, *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 38.

³¹⁹ Tavard, *The Thousand Faces*, 38.

³²⁰ R. D. Aus, *Weihnachtsgeschichte, barmherziger Samariter, verllorener Sohn. Studien zu ihrem jüdischen Hintergrund* (Berlin: Institut Kirche und Judentum, 1988), 42-43.

³²¹ Brian Daley, "Born of a Virgin," *The Tablet* 19/26 (December, 1992): 1603. See Paul D. Murray, *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning: Exploring a Way for Contemporary Ecumenism* (London/New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 445, suggesting a more modest result of recent ecumenism regarding Mary's virginity: "The Virgin birth is a widely accepted tradition, though interpreted differently in some churches."

VIII. FEMININE SENSITIVITIES

Feminine sensitivity about Mary and her profile as a virgin cannot be subsumed into the generic labeling of feminist theology. The latter comes with ideological undertones which suggest systematic suspicion and mostly outright opposition to the discourse on virginity. Recent observations seem to adopt a more experiential and introspective stance guided by feminine sensitivity. In its extreme form it will claim the glorious freedom of "reinterpreting, re-creating every aspect of Christian theology,"³²² but there exists a different approach seeking a "new feminism," a more relational and integrating vision of women in theology.³²³ It is of course always possible to typify various feminist orientations on Mary, for example, as the 'eternal feminine,' as 'symbol of ecclesial demonization of women,' 'symbol of pre-christian feminine archetype and myth,' 'symbol of feminine autonomy,' and 'sign of the importance of women in salvation history.'³²⁴ In all of these representations Mary is seen as a *symbolic* figure. More recent profiles of Mary are intent on retrieving her bodily reality, not least in aspects related to virginity.³²⁵ However, it still applies that feminist reflection on the subject of virginity remains ambivalent. It oscillates between feminine autonomy (a positive reading) and an accusation of anti-feminism (a negative reading). Between the two there is what one might call a reading on virginity of the second degree and sometimes the absence of any discussion of virginity.

There is a tendency to ignore the subject of Mary's virginity simply because it is not considered useful or important in

³²² L. Tatman, *Knowledge That Matters: A Feminist Theological Paradigm and Epistemology* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001), 260.

³²³ Michele M. Schumacher (ed.), *Women in Christ: Toward a New Feminism* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 2004), viii.

³²⁴ K.-H. Menke, *Fleisch geworden aus Maria. Die Geschichte Israels und der Mariënglaube der Kirche* (Regensburg: Pustet, 1999), 168-171.

³²⁵ For one among many, see E. Johnson, "Mary of Nazareth: Friend of God and Prophet," *America* 182, no. 21 (June 17-24, 2000): 11-13.

feminist discourse on Mary.³²⁶ In her image of Mary, Mary E. Hines, by way of a change in perception, speaks of a prophetic image, of a symbol of wisdom, of the first disciple, of correcting our way of speaking about God, even of a symbol of the Church. In this panoply of Marian images, virginity finds no place.³²⁷ The images set forth are geared towards a historical approach to the person of Mary that is more imaginative, one that is therefore more accessible and closer to feminine experience. They favor a theological approach which sees in Mary a figure of the Church, that is, the type of a community of disciples. The traditional qualities of virgin and mother are to be read anew in the sense of a proclamation of liberty and liberation.³²⁸ It is easy to see in these efforts at reconstructing Marian theology that virginity is not discussed directly, if indeed it is not suppressed outright, in order to evade a theological problem with which it is difficult to cope.

There is a way of speaking about virginity that abstracts from any scriptural or theological context. This is what we find when Chung Hyun Kyung offers the following description: "When a woman defines herself according to her own understanding of who she really is and what she is meant for in this universe (not according to the rules and norms of patriarchy),

³²⁶ It is surprising to observe that a study on Mary's role as servant goes without establishing a connection with the theme of virginity. See Janyce Covner Jorgensen, "The Ecumenical Interpretation of Mary, the Mother of Jesus as *bae doulae* (Luke 1:38, 48), Its Feminist Use and Critique," dissertation (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 2001); from a Latin American perspective, Maria Pilar Aquino argues that a mariology "that stresses women's *feminine nature* in its primary role as virgin, wife, and mother dependent on men has gradually ceased to express women's experience of faith and spiritual pilgrimage." Cf. M. Pilar Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 173.

³²⁷ M. E. Hines, "The Changing Image of Mary in U.S. Culture," in *L'Immagine teologica di Maria, oggi. Fede e Cultura. Atti del 10 simposio Internazionale Mariologico (Roma, 4-7 ottobre 1994)* (Rome: Marianum, 1996), 323-324.

³²⁸ E. Maeckelberghe, on the subject of E. Johnson, in *Desperately Seeking Mary: A Feminist Appropriation of a Traditional Religious Symbol* (Kampen, The Netherlands: Pharos, 1991), 23.

she is a virgin."³²⁹ The connection with the Incarnation is absent or so slight that the term 'virgin' is emptied of its original content. It is no longer a symbol, but a pure metaphor. Certain rereadings in feminist Christology lead to the same result as, for example, when Christology abstracts from the person of Christ for the purpose of "generating together images of what is redemptive or liberating."³³⁰ Or when incarnation starts from women's experience and the purpose of Christology becomes "how we might be empowered for change."³³¹ A generic mention of virginity may simply signal women's "autonomy and independence, not subjection to others."³³²

It is true that many of these redefinitions—if they are positive—express some variant or aspect of feminine autonomy. For S. Cunneen, virginity is a sign of independence and self-government, like the Mediterranean goddesses who are virgins because they are free and not because they practice sexual abstinence.³³³ For Christian Makarian: "to be a virgin after the example of Mary means above all to refuse the corruption of the world and to affirm that one has in one's heart (elsewhere) something that is pure and perfect."³³⁴ The virginity of Mary is where man changes "the decrees of inaccessible transcendence." This idea of autonomy has its origin in the psychological interpretation of virginity first propounded by C. J. M. Halkes and M. K. Massel and comprises potential both

³²⁹ See also J. Cheah, "Asian Women's Mariology in Christological Context," *Marian Studies* 46 (1995): 83; Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990), 75-78, 76.

³³⁰ Julie M. Hopkins, *Towards a Feminist Christology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1994), 87.

³³¹ L. Isherwood, *Introducing Feminist Christologies* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2002), 7-9.

³³² Kwok Pui-Lan, "Feminist Theology, Southern," in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, ed. P. Scoff and W. T. Cavanaugh (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 200.

³³³ S. Cunneen, *In Search of Mary: The Woman and the Symbol* (New York: Balantine Books, 1996), 281-285.

³³⁴ C. Makarian, *Marie* (Paris: Desclée, 1995), 152.

biological (source of life) and psychological (self-consciousness).³³⁵ The stress is placed on the person, one's own master, open—sometimes!—to others and to God, based on one's own identity.³³⁶ C. Halkes makes a connection between virginity and “integrity” to indicate openness to divine mystery rather than servitude to an obsessive sexual abstinence, and bodily integrity as a symbol of resistance to violation and sexual exploitation.³³⁷ In most cases, however, autonomy essentially means separation from or opposition to masculine society that usurps divinity and omnipotence.³³⁸ Sölle's recent book on Mary, which wants to be a mariology from below, trods the same path. Such mariology for women from women is not interested in dogma, miracle, and masculine theology. What it wants is “liberation from lifeless dogma.”³³⁹ Perpetual virginity thus amounts to “declaring fantasy as fact,” and elicits rightful indignation, “that Mary had other children is still fiercely denied by many exponents of patriarchal theology.”³⁴⁰

The positive reading on virginity sometimes leads to exalting the work of God and of the woman Mary, in the absence of man or against man.³⁴¹ E. Klinger sees the challenge of feminist Christology in the fact that Jesus is son of a woman alone; he

³³⁵ See E. Maeckelberghe, *Desperately Seeking Mary*; 32-33; M. Kassel, “Mary and the Human Psyche,” *Concilium* 168/8 (1983): 80; and his “Maria-Urbild des Weiblichen im Christentum?” in *Was gibt uns Maria an?* ed. E. Moltmann-Wendel et al. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1988), 146 ff.

³³⁶ Cf. C. J. M. Halkes, “Eine andere Maria,” *Wörter und Sachen* 32 (1987): 322.

³³⁷ C. J. M. Halkes and E. Schillebeeckx, *Mary: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 75.

³³⁸ C. Mulack, *Maria. Die geheime Göttin im Christentum* (Stuttgart: Kreuz, 1985), 91.

³³⁹ D. Sölle, *Maria. Eine Begegnung mit der Muttergottes* (Freiburg: Herder, 2005), 51-57, here 103.

³⁴⁰ L. Isherwood and D. McEwan, *Introducing Feminist Theology* (Sheffield, GB: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 67.

³⁴¹ Delores S. Williams, “Womanist Theology: Black Women's Voices,” in *Feminist Theology from the Third World*, ed. U. King (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 85. J. Sheffield will speak of the “earthly father discredited.” See J. Sheffield, “The Father in the Gospel of Matthew,” in *A Feminist Companion to Matthew*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 52-69.

is alone son of a woman. Virginity then stands for Jesus and Mary as symbols of the new people of God.³⁴² Coming from a similar understanding, Crossan crosses the political line suggesting that "divinity and virginity were dangerous claims for Jesus' conception, but they were also one way to oppose and transcend imperial (scil. Roman) claims for divinity and non-virginity."³⁴³ Feminist rhetorical literary analysis stresses the same point: Mary's virginity represents a challenge directed at the masculine control of births. Mary is sanctified in her direct relation with God and it is she who, in the non-sexual creation of Jesus in her womb, takes complete control of reproduction.³⁴⁴ Must we conclude that God (or Mary) chose virginity to embarrass males? We must not forget that for certain writers the Blessed Virgin and physical virginity are opposed or contradict each other. This last is set aside in favor of the former.³⁴⁵

There likewise persist the negative views of Mary's virginity, which are based primarily on the absence of sexuality or on sexual fixation. The anti-sexual argument against virginity comes in various shades. There is the regretful observation that virginity had been more a statement about the body than "about the power of God," neglecting thereby Mary's active hardship during pregnancy, labor of birth, and rearing of a child.³⁴⁶ More pointedly accentuated is the accusation of dualistic thinking opposing the spiritual realm and the realm of the body: "... it did not seem fitting for Mary, the New Eve, to be identified in any way with the realm of the body including

³⁴² E. Klinger, *Christologie im Feminismus. Eine Herausforderung der Tradition* (Regensburg: Pustet Verlag, 2001), 159 and 207.

³⁴³ J. D. Crossan, "Virgin Mother or Bastard Child," in *A Feminist Companion to Mariology*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (New York: T and T Clark International, 2005), 55.

³⁴⁴ Janice Capel Anderson, "Mary's Difference: Gender and Patriarchy in the Birth Narratives," *Journal of Religion* 67/2 (April 1987): 199.

³⁴⁵ Barbara Walker, *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* (Edison, NJ: Castle Books, 1996, c1983), 1049.

³⁴⁶ Susan A. Ross, "Extravagant Affections: Women's Sexuality and Theological Anthropology," in *In the Embrace of God: Feminist Approaches to Theological Anthropology*, ed. A. O'Hara Graff (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 113-114.

sexual reproduction."³⁴⁷ For Barbara Horton Jones "the primary purpose [of virginity] is to make clear the unique parentage of Jesus." Thus, Mary was virgin before the marriage. Not so after Jesus was born: "It appears that she was free to enjoy a full sexual relationship with her husband."³⁴⁸ Mary's modeling "seasons of sexuality"³⁴⁹ springs from the author's generous heart and somewhat limited exegetical expertise.

There is not the same enthusiasm and generosity in M. Hamington's assessment of virginity. According to this author, "Mary's non-sexual imagery remains the ultimate model of alienation for Catholic women."³⁵⁰ We must get rid of Marian imagery based on the virgin (sexual fixation), the New Eve (hatred of women), and mediatrix (subordination) and replace all this with "Mary-Everywoman," that is, Mary-Woman (independence), Mary-Mother (creative energy) and Mary-Sister (solidarity).³⁵¹ The figure of Mary, and virginity especially, contribute to perpetuate in the Catholic Church a condition of mental slavery and abuse of power by the imposition of a Marian ideal impossible to follow, the valorization of suffering and self-sacrifice, and by the teaching of an essentialist morality based on sex and sexuality.³⁵² Elevating the idea of anti-sexualism to an ontological level, E. Schüssler-Fiorenza speaks of the perpetuation of the body-soul dualism which serves to destroy the equality of the sexes. The unfortunate consequence of this is that the biological difference becomes an ontological difference based on sex. Furthermore, virginity also perpetuates a stratification or caste system among women by placing virginity above maternity.³⁵³

³⁴⁷ Anne M. Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 187.

³⁴⁸ B. H. Jones, *Empowered with Mary: Affirming Full Personhood in the New Millennium* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publ. Co., 2000), 216.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 232.

³⁵⁰ Maurice Hamington, *Hail Mary?: The Struggle for Ultimate Womanhood in Catholicism* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 87.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 159 and 174.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 81, 149.

³⁵³ E. Schüssler-Fiorenza, "Feminist Theology as a Critical Theology of Liberation," *Theological Studies* 36/4 (December 1975): 622-623, cited in Hamington, *Hail Mary?*, 77.

E. Schüssler-Fiorenza considers the virgin birth a fairy tale, but recognizes in it a great power of evocation and transformation. The history of Mary is the “dangerous memory” of a young girl pregnant, living in an occupied territory and fighting for her survival and dignity.³⁵⁴ E. Johnson inspired by this characterization of Mary will make it the title of her mosaic of Mary in Scripture³⁵⁵ to reach the following conclusion: “Despite the ambiguity of its [virgin birth] history, the theological significance of this narrative of socially irregular pregnancy is the heart of the matter.”³⁵⁶ Uta Ranke-Heinemann,³⁵⁷ once called for the demythologizing of the Virgin Mary and to do this rested on the two “classical” arguments: that of the theory of goddess virgins³⁵⁸ and the insolubility of the gynecological problem.³⁵⁹ For this author, Jesus is and remains a woman or a transsexual.

If Schüssler-Fiorenza and Ranke-Heinemann mark the age of ideological discourse in feminist theology and its combative opposition to masculine theology, their younger sisters follow in the footsteps of Postmodern conciliatory ambivalence, not to say ambiguity. C. Militello³⁶⁰ refrains from indiscrete probing into the physical aspects of virginity, but not so Sarah Jane Boss and others. It is Sarah Boss’s opinion that “contemporary authors shy away from the topic of Mary’s physical childbearing.” If Suarez in anatomical frankness still used a language of

³⁵⁴ E. Schüssler-Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 185-187.

³⁵⁵ E. A. Johnson, *Dangerous Memories: A Mosaic of Mary in Scripture, Drawn from “Truly Our Sister”* (London/New York: Continuum, 2006).

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

³⁵⁷ U. Ranke-Heinemann, *Nein und Amen* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1992), 33-51.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁵⁹ Parthenogenesis—cf. *Ibid.*, 44.

³⁶⁰ C. Militello, *Maria con occhi di Donna* (Casale Monferrato: Piemme, 1999), 55-101, quoted in S. Perrella, *La Madre di Gesù nella coscienza ecclesiale contemporanea. Saggi di teologia* (Città del Vaticano: Pontificia Academia Mariana Internationalis, 2005), 336: “Le donne teologhe, che non amano l’indiscreto indugiare feticistico nell’esplicitazione teologica del fatto e segno verginale, con grande sapienza religiosa e sensibilità antropologico-femminile, affermano e invitano il cristiano della post-modernità ad accogliere la verginità feconda di Maria come ‘un mistero da credere.’”

"blood and entrails," Rahner "prefers to inhabit the realms of mind and spirit" when speaking of Mary's virginity.³⁶¹ The reference to physicality is not used to deny virginity *in partu* or perpetual virginity. According to Sarah Jane Boss, "this doctrine (*in partu*!) has been attractive to women in childbirth because it offers hope that Mary, who has given birth without pain or injury, may be able to assist them also to obtain a safe delivery."³⁶² In this case physicality takes on the meaning of integrity and integrality of the woman's body. Christ is born of Mary "without any material breach in her body." Thus, Mary "manifests to the fullest possible extent the generating action of God whose Son is also her own."³⁶³ Tina Beattie has mariological affinities with S. J. Boss insofar as "the rehabilitation of the maternal body" is concerned. In her optic "Mary's virginity symbolizes nature prior to human cultivation. . . . That is virginity understood not as sexual restraint but on the contrary, as the unrestrained fecundity of nature outside human control."³⁶⁴

E.A. Johnson's reading of the birth event leads in the opposite direction: "She [Mary] would not need to be purified from uncleanness if this were a miraculous birth. Real blood was shed at this delivery, by a poor woman of peasant society far from home, laboring in childbirth for the first time. And it was holy."³⁶⁵ Charlene Spretnak would agree with the holy character of child birth, but not for the same reason. She resonates with the pre-Christian tradition of "perpetual renewal of the natural world in the earth-body of the sacred female." As far as

³⁶¹ Sarah Jane Boss, *Empress and Handmaid: On Nature and Gender in the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London/New York: Cassell, 2000), 64-66.

³⁶² Sarah Jane Boss, *Mary*, New Century Theology (London/New York: Continuum, 2004), 102.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*, 104.

³⁶⁴ T. Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate: A Gynocentric Refiguration of Marian Symbolism in Engagement with Lucie Irigaray*, CCSRG Monograph Series 3 (Bristol: University of Bristol, 1999), 88, 99. See also by the same author, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate: A Marian Narrative of Women's Salvation* (London/New York: Continuum, 2002), 125-132.

³⁶⁵ *Dangerous Memories*, 127/128.

virginity *in partu* goes, Spretnak qualifies it as the lucubration of a misogynist psyche leading to denigration of sex, the female body, and birth giving.³⁶⁶ Basing herself on the fetus's cells and DNA received by the mother's body (which can "remain in her indefinitely," according to the author!), she raises the audacious question of Mary's divinity: "divine presence entered Mary from the moment she assented at the Annunciation, and it never left."³⁶⁷ Strongly articulated physicality may lead to an express "sexual option,"³⁶⁸ but the overall tendencies in most of the examples given reflect a curiously careless oscillation between body-claim and theological symbolization, the latter frequently leaving the boundaries of theology to lose itself in the nebula of mytho-psychology. This may occur when virginity is assimilated to the rejuvenation of the untamed goddess³⁶⁹ or when Mary's body is understood as both "transformed feminine" and as the Great Mother archetype.³⁷⁰

Two books from an earlier period treat the virgin birth exclusively: J. Schabert, the *Illegitimacy of Jesus*,³⁷¹ and J. S. Spong, *Born of a Woman*.³⁷² The first work mentioned endeavors to be a work of feminist erudition, while the second is understood to be a popularization based supposedly on the works of Schabert and Brown.

In the conclusion of her study, Schabert criticizes the spirit of surrender on the part of R. Ruether with respect to the teaching on the virginal birth and goes on to explain why the

³⁶⁶ C. Spretnak, *Missing Mary: The Queen of Heaven and Her Re-emergence in the Modern Church* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 207.

³⁶⁷ Ibid., 208.

³⁶⁸ M. Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London/New York: Routledge, 2000), 47.

³⁶⁹ L. Isherwood, *The Power of Erotic Celibacy: Queering Heteropatriarchy* (London: T and T Clark, 2006), 1.

³⁷⁰ V. Wright, *Maid in God's Image: In Search of the Unruly Woman* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 2008), 104.

³⁷¹ J. Schabert, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives* (New York: Crossroads, 1990).

³⁷² J. S. Spong, *Born of a Woman: A Bishop Rethinks the Birth of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992).

tradition of Jesus' illegitimacy ought to be taken up again. The illegitimate conception is presented as a grace and not as a disgrace. The child conceived outside of patriarchal structures is seen as to his own value and not that of his family, especially that of his legal father. Mary is representative of the oppressed who have been freed; she had "access to the sacred aside from any control exercised by the patriarchal family."³⁷³ Criticism has not been slow to point out that the thematic was ancient and that it was in ancient times rejected, that it was tainted with a much too evident feminist interest, and that it too closely resembled the profile of the celibate mother of today.

The conclusions of Spong, a onetime prominent bishop of the U.S. Episcopal church, are not very original. They reflect the faith of American Protestant feminism on the subject of the virginal conception. Spong concludes that the figure of Mary has been used as a weapon by men to oppress women in the name of a God called Father, in order to educe them to a humanity inferior to that of men. Hence Spong's conclusion that Mary has had a baneful influence on the history of Christian women,³⁷⁴ and hence also his ridicule of the virginity both *in* and *post partum*.³⁷⁵ In his time, this book has created quite a stir in the media. It is unfortunate that it is books of this kind that form and deform public opinion and sometimes even the catechetical stance of many believers.

The range of feminist opinions of virginity, broadly defined, is vast. It ranges from its use as means of consolidating male power to the glorification of virginity as a cry of feminine liberty. Accused by some of promoting a lifestyle that is non-relational and non-sexual, virginity is seen by others as promoting the reification of heterosexuality (woman being defined by man). It is difficult to find a common denominator for these discordant voices. That which unites many, if not all,

³⁷³ Schabert, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus*, 199.

³⁷⁴ J. Spong, *Born of a Woman*, 224.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 214.

of these views is the priority given to the significance of the fact.³⁷⁶ This can be noted in the inauguration of the new creation (C. Militello), in the going beyond egoism through birth-giving with pain (Giulia Paola di Nicola and Cristina Grenholm),³⁷⁷ a radical openness and giving of self to the action of Spirit of God (Pia Gyger)³⁷⁸ or simply as the expression of a woman full of life, capable of both suffering and pleasure (Julia Kristeva).³⁷⁹ In the midst of this abundance of meanings, questions about the historicity, the biological character, and the preferential theological significance appear to be of lesser importance. Much of what contemporary feminine sensitivities regarding Mary's virginity yearn for and/or request and appropriate can be summarized in three points: (1) the rehabilitation of the bodily and sexual nature of feminine experience, (2) the re-evaluation of community and companionship with Mary, a strong woman of faith, and (3) a more generous feminization of the images of God.³⁸⁰

IX. BETWEEN CULTURE AND KERYGMA

There is a sort of red thread weaving through the eight sections of this evaluation of Mary's virginity in recent decades. Coming from different and sometimes opposing directions and options, the main concern of recent developments seems to be

³⁷⁶ See, e.g., C. Militello, *Mariologia* (Casale Monferrato: Ed. Piemme, 1991), 35-50; id., "Riflessione femminile e virginità di Maria: rilettura critica di alcune posizioni," in *Atti di Capua* (1992), 1:361-399.

³⁷⁷ For Nicola, see Perrella, "Il parto verginale di Maria nel dibattito teologico," 198; Cristina Grenholm, "Jésus d'un point de vue féministe. L'Incarnation et l'expérience de la grossesse," *Concilium* 269 (1997): 44-45.

³⁷⁸ P. Gyger, *Maria, Tochter der Erde, Königin des Alls. Vision der neuen Schöpfung* (München: Kösel Verlag, 2002), 33ff.

³⁷⁹ See Phyllis H. Kaminski, "Kristeva and the Cross: Rereading the Symbol of Redemption," in *Women and Theology*, ed. M. A. Hinsdale and P. H. Kaminsky (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 242.

³⁸⁰ See Denise Couture, "Marie aujourd'hui. Point de vue de théologie spirituelle et féministe," in *Parler de Marie, d'hier à aujourd'hui*, ed. P. Daviau, 166; Jane E. M. Jones, "Liberating the Virgin (Describing the History and the Contemporary Significance of *in partu* Virginity)," *The Month* (May 1999): 184-188.

to “make sense” of virginity, to explore its significance and applicability. In so evolving, the topic achieved the status of public property—no longer a secret garden of theology but a market place of needs and interest, from public discourse by the media to the complex challenges of inculturation. The main question then is not what virginity is, but what end it might serve and what use it might have. This cultural appropriation of virginity was caused by an overall and moral devaluation of virginity in contemporary society, on the one hand, and the even more ruinous attempts at emptying Mary’s virginity of its exegetical foundation and value, on the other hand. If culture grapples with questions of meaning and usefulness, *kerygma* in turn labors in view of retrieval, higher visibility, and reassessment and stabilizing of the central doctrinal reality of virginal conception, virginity *in partu*, and perpetual virginity. Thus, there exists a certain convergence between culture and kerygma. The following developments will try to measure that convergence, its degree and meaning.

A. Culture as Present Imperative

Within the bounds of Western culture, we detect, above all, three factors that impact on the discourse about the virginity of Mary. The cultural approach is neither polemical nor apologetic. It reports facts without sitting in tribunal about their meaning, at least in appearance. The cultural approach is marked by the language and *Weltanschauung* proper to the mass media. This is evident in the way virginity is spoken about. Secondly, and as reaction, we can observe a certain tendency to remythologize. Finally, contemporary Church culture is marked by the imperatives of inculturation.

1. Cultural Objectivity?

A certain number of recent books present Mary primarily in a cultural manner. The cultural approach uses a descriptive method which reports what Scripture and Tradition tell us about Mary and avoids any interpretation thereof. The end result of this kind of writing is that it presents us with a series of portraits of Mary through the centuries. And so, Jaroslav

Pelikan³⁸¹ intends to describe the place of Mary throughout the history of culture and passes no judgment on the value of the various positions on virginity. With respect to the idea of the Virgin mother, he states concisely: "and the truth was seen to lie in the paradox."³⁸² Sally Cunneen³⁸³ chose a similar approach when favoring a feminine rereading. The cultural history of Mary is examined in light of the experience of women today. Here again we find a simple juxtaposition of different notions about the conception and birth of Jesus. However, the author, with some others, notes that "nothing in Scripture supports the idea that Mary remained physically intact while giving birth, or that she had no sexual relations with her husband after Jesus was born."³⁸⁴

A similar approach, but one that is more engaged, tries to make the texts *uniform* by presenting them as information pure and simple. Thus, for J. Duquesne the virginal conception is not essential to faith. But believers who accept it can say that nothing is impossible for God.³⁸⁵ Similarly, for C. Makarian the virginity of Mary is an article of faith about which everyone is free to think as he/she feels fit.³⁸⁶ In both cases, we have information given on the data of Scripture and Tradition while devaluing or neutralizing it and which, at the same time, invites the reader to make his/her own value judgment—a now typical stance of Western culture.

More specifically, today the cultural approach is used to reread Scripture in the light of cultural anthropology. Bruce Malina proposes the following theory: "If some feature exists in the Mediterranean society and everything indicates that it always has been that way in the Mediterranean, it must have been (that way also) in the past."³⁸⁷ Mary is then redefined as

³⁸¹ J. Pelikan, *Mary: through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1996).

³⁸² *Ibid.*, 122.

³⁸³ S. Cunneen, *In Search of Mary*, 281-285.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁸⁵ J. Duquesne, *Jésus*, 42.

³⁸⁶ C. Makarian, *Marie* (Paris: Desclée, 1995), 104.

³⁸⁷ B. Malina, "Mother and Son," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 20 (Summer 1990): 63.

a Mediterranean woman. According to this author, what is especially characteristic of this culture are the close links in the family and the sociological types based on a person's sex. In basing themselves on these hypotheses, which are in fact ostensibly retro-projective, B. Malina, and in particular Jerome H. Neyrey,³⁸⁸ have established the following correlation (not to say an equation): As a Mediterranean woman, Mary embodies the feminine character typical of that culture, that is, an ensemble of values based essentially on the idea of a sense of shame (opposed to the masculine idea of honor). These are the values found at the origin of her virginity.

Culturization of religion unconsciously pursues a *presentist* and ahistorical line of thought equating truth with immediacy of meaning. Public discourse as produced by the media is its principal carrier. There is an evident difference between a nuanced and complex theology on virginity and the laws of public discourse to which it is submitted. One of the important challenges tossed at contemporary theology is the finding of a language for the media, that is, a language capable of mediation between public opinion and theological discourse through a communication adapted to the masses but faithful to the content of the message. For the subject of virginity, will this mean a more direct recourse to symbolic language?³⁸⁹

Quite fortunately, certain authors remind us of the importance of the mental bases or structures that are needed for a positive or adequate understanding of virginity. In present-day society, what are the cultural values or archetypes that allow for a reinculturation of the notion, the reality of the virginal birth? Stirnimann makes us aware of the fact that the categories of symbolic intelligibility³⁹⁰ for the understanding of virginity are largely lacking to us. Paredes quite accurately remarks that the seduction of a *goddess* theme seems not to

³⁸⁸ J. H. Neyrey, "Maid and Mother in Art and Literature," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 20 (Summer 1990): 75.

³⁸⁹ For a better understanding of the mechanisms of public discourse, see, e.g., J. Cottin and R. Walbaum, *Dieu et la pub* (Paris: Cerf, 1997), 54-59.

³⁹⁰ Stirnimann, *Marjam*, 242.

have lost its appeal in today's world.³⁹¹ Research and careful study are called for in order to fill the void or to avoid losing one's way in the maze of fortuitous symbolizing.

2. Recapturing Myth

In general, contemporary exegetes and theologians agree in saying that the time of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* is over. They reject any true analogy between the virginal birth of Luke and Matthew and the information drawn from pre-Christian sources as, for example, Plutarch and Philo.³⁹² However, it is a fact of history that one-sided concentration on the present, immediacy, and concrete truth generates adverse reactions leading to efforts to recapture an ideal world, and in its wake myth and the irrational. Unfortunately, there are forms of remythologizing that do not have much to contribute to a correct interpretation of the subject of virginity.

First, there is a form of remythologization that leads to the rediscovery of the goddess, due especially to the combined efforts of feminology and depth psychology. Here, the figure of Mary is not the principal object of discussion. She is seen as one in a long line of feminine figures, either divine or divinized, ranging from the paleolithic mother goddess to Mother-Wisdom. Often used to illustrate the sacred marriage of transcendence with immanence, Mary represents the principle of life (*zoe*), who in her son makes manifest the transnatural dimension of life (*bios*). As for the virginal birth, we rediscover it in the well-known theory of a god who appropriates a virgin.³⁹³ Evidently, there is no longer any question of historicity. Mary is promoted to universal symbol of the vital feminine principle, but in fact represents only one of its numerous variants. Mary becomes

³⁹¹ García Paredes, *Mariología*, 185.

³⁹² E. Mussner, "Das semantische Universum der Verkündigungssperikope (Lk 1, 26-38)," *Catholica* 46 (1992): 233; Stirnimann, *Marjam*, 222.

³⁹³ "... so that the conception of Jesus was understood as having taken place at two levels, within a divine (scil. Holy Spirit) and then a human mother, though Mary is only the vessel not the egg"—A. Baring and J. Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image* (London/New York: Arkana, 1993, c1991), 597.

the victim of religious syncretism. This can be of either ancient or recent manufacture. In both cases, Mary recovers the sexuality of which she has been deprived thanks to recourse to the notion of the goddess.³⁹⁴

A second form of remythologizing comes closer to the classical explanation of *Religionsgeschichte*, with this difference: that it encompasses all aspects of the figure of Mary and not only the virginal conception. Here the main interest focuses on conformity without break or transition with a break between the pre-Christian era and Christianity. Serious research on this question is due to the pen of S. Benko.³⁹⁵ As regards the virginity of Mary (conception/birth), the author calls attention to the need the first Christians had to be able to read the novelty of the message in and through the mental categories with which they were familiar.³⁹⁶ The opinion of Jean Markale moves in the opposite direction. He wants to show that Myriam-Mary can be assimilated to the great goddess. In his treatment of virginity, he reaches the following conclusion: "The Virgin is strong and because she is free, she is available to everyone: she is the mother without name nor limit. Even if the details in the Gospels are limited, and probably deliberately truncated, as regards herself, it is important to recognize that Myriam-Mary has all the traits of the traditional virgin,"³⁹⁷ that is, of the

³⁹⁴ M. R. Lefkowitz, "The New Cults of the Goddess," *The American Scholar* 62/2 (Spring 1993): 267; H. G. Nuni, "Syncretism and Acculturation: The Historical Development of the Cult of the Patron Saint in Tlaxcala, Mexico (1519-1670)," *Ethnology* 15/3 (July 1976): 307/308; P. Guirlanda, "Return to the Mountain of Love," *Cross Currents* 46/2 (Summer 1996): 253; W. Griffin, "The Embodied Goddess: Feminist Witchcraft and Female Divinity," *Sociology of Religion* 56/1 (1995): 43-44; K. Vanesveld Adams, "The Madonna and Margaret Fuller," *Women's Studies* 25 (1966): 399ff.

³⁹⁵ S. Benko, *The Virgin Goddess: Studies in the Pagan and Christian Roots of Mariology* (Leiden/New York: E. J. Brill, 1993).

³⁹⁶ Ibid., 202: "For the Christian claim of salvation, the death and resurrection of Jesus were central issues, not the condition of Mary's hymen. But for the minds accustomed to thinking in the categories of the prevalent pagan culture, the mother of the Son of God could have no lesser dignity than the Great Mother of the gods ..." Quite so, also, as regards the virginal conception and birth.

³⁹⁷ J. Markale, *La grande déesse. Mythes et sanctuaires de la Vénus de Lespugue à Notre-Dame de Lourdes* (Paris: A. Michel, 1997), 30-31.

pre-Christian one! E. and G. Rotter concern themselves with the history of sexuality, to expose it as a drama of inhibition and repression put in place by monotheistic religions.³⁹⁸ The Virgin Mary is presented as the antitype of Venus, and her followers as the eunuchs of Cybele or Artemis, in short as the "Göttin der Lustfeindlichkeit."³⁹⁹ Nevertheless, the notion of goddess is not well seen by all, including feminist theologians. S. Cunneen notes: "Seeing Mary only as a stand-in for God . . . is as bad as limiting her to the role of inimitable virgin-mother."⁴⁰⁰

The mytho-psychological exploration is an important form of present-day remythologizing of Mary's virginity. E. Drewermann has been one of its more prominent advocates. He is opposed to the historic explanation of the virginal conception and birth. He is not interested in the event but in its meaning. The nativity is an account of the beginning of our own life made possible by Jesus and his incarnation. Therefore the virginal conception is rooted in the human soul and its renewal, not in the biography of Mary. It is a mythic symbol, a miracle of the soul and not of the body, the transformation and the renewal of conscience, not an exterior event.⁴⁰¹ Insofar as the person is regenerated, one can say that he or she is born virginally. To illustrate this interpretation, Drewermann established a parallel between the Egyptian Pharaoh and Jesus Christ. Pharaoh is the son of the sun and a symbol of the complete man or the new man. He is the fruit of a virginal birth, the self-creation of a new personality, thanks to self-conscientization. Like the myth of the virginal rising of the sun, Christ typifies the regeneration of humanity because he is born of the Virgin Mary.⁴⁰² Virginity is thus closely linked to recommencement, to regeneration, to the realization of the self

³⁹⁸ That is "Goddess, enemy of pleasure"; E. & G. Rotter, *Venus, Maria, Fatima. Wie die Lust zum Teufel ging* (Zürich/Düsseldorf: Artemis & Winkler, 1996).

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 199, 137.

⁴⁰⁰ S. Cunneen, *In Search of Mary*, 305.

⁴⁰¹ E. Drewermann, *Tiefenpsychologie und Exegese*, 2nd ed. (2 vols., Olten: Walter-Verlag, 1991), Bd. 1. *Die Wahrheit der Formen*, 502ff.; Bd. 2. *Die Wahrheit der Werke und der Worte*, 604.

⁴⁰² See E. Drewermann, *Dein Name ist wie der Geschmack des Lebens. Tiefenpsychologische Deutung der Kindheitsgeschichte nach dem Lukas-Evangelium* (Freiburg: Herder, 1986), 60.

and to *Ganzwerdung* (identity/totality). For Drewermann, the virginal conception is summed up in the symbolic description of a soul renewed and rejuvenated.⁴⁰³ The Jungian psychologization of Drewermann differs from that of M. P. Carroll, which is clearly more Freudian, and for whom Mary the virgin serves as an innocent fetish for the sexual fantasies of celibate males, priests, and religious especially. And so the Oedipus complex is avoided.⁴⁰⁴ Nonetheless, the recent efforts towards a positive evaluation of myth and how it relates to virginity reflects, according to certain authors, the end of a simplistic and gullible scientific fundamentalism.⁴⁰⁵

3. *The Challenge of Inculturation*

Inculturation admits of numerous facets. One of the keynotes of the so-called "young theologies" of Africa and Asia, it serves more than one purpose. For some it is an instrument of liberation; for others a matter of assimilating local culture. For a more- and broader-oriented interreligious dialog, it signals commitment to a common ethical platform.⁴⁰⁶ In-depth discussions of the intricate and elaborate discourse on Mary's virginity are not a central concern of these theologies, with the exception maybe of feminist inculturation.

Dosithée Atal Sa Angang acknowledges a limited value to virginity for Africa. Virginity is limited as to time in view of a special mission, since the "purpose of virginity constitutes or can sometimes constitute in certain cases in Africa an important stage of a woman's maturation, since it is understood that a woman is destined for procreation."⁴⁰⁷ On the other hand,

⁴⁰³ Ibid., 42, 50.

⁴⁰⁴ M. P. Carroll, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary: Psychological Origins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1986), 56.

⁴⁰⁵ K.-H. Menke, *Fleisch geworden aus Maria. Die Geschichte Israels und der Marienglaube der Kirche* (Regensburg: Verlag Pustet, 1999), 84.

⁴⁰⁶ Paul F. Knitter, *The Myth of Religious Superiority: Multifaith Explorations of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), xi.

⁴⁰⁷ "African Culture and Theological Reflection on the Virgin Mary, the Mother of Jesus," in *L'immagine teologica di Maria, oggi. Fede e cultura (Atti del 10o Simposio internazionale mariologico (Roma, 4-7 ottobre 1994))*, ed. E. Peretto (Rome: Edizione Marianum, 1996), 166-167.

among the Basotho of South Africa, Mary's virginity, the virgin birth especially, has nothing strange about it and echoes certain local traditions.⁴⁰⁸ One has to see the African Mary fundamentally as a "mother whose maternal role in the history of salvation of humankind symbolizes God's communication with humanity." Her virginity is seen principally as "model of a new morality" and its purpose to produce a "healing effect."⁴⁰⁹

As for the people of India, systematic Mariological reflection is replaced by a Marian devotion or spirituality with trans-Christian overtones. In a sub-continent where the equality of religions is strongly marked, the historic figure of Mary loses its importance.⁴¹⁰ Above all, Mary is a symbol or an icon of the love of God. In the midst of a pluralist conception of religion, Mary is a symbol of reconciliation. In the face of poverty and social injustice the need is felt to make Mary a model of liberating engagement and action.⁴¹¹ In a different context, mention should be made of the existence of nuns among the first women disciples of Boudha Shakyamuni. Susan Murcott presents some impressive portraits of these exceptional women,⁴¹² showing that the idea of virginity is not unknown in that religious culture!

⁴⁰⁸ See Gabriel Tlaba, "The Adaptability of the Image of Mary in African Culture," in *L'immagine teologica di Maria, oggi*, 199.

⁴⁰⁹ E Nwaigbo, *Mary—Mother of the African Church: A Theological Inculturation of Mariology*, Bamberger Theologische Studien, Bd. 16 (Frankfurt am Main/New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 28, 60.

⁴¹⁰ An interesting example reinforcing this impression is M. Salazar's "Miriam of Nazareth: A Jewish Galilean," *East Asian Pastoral Review* 42/4 (2005): 353ff. The author offers a social biography of Mary, as if her person were unknown, and refrains from theological developments other than a brief mention of the brothers and sisters of Jesus. See same article, 366-367, nn. 4-6.

⁴¹¹ See Dominic Veliath, "Indian Culture and Theological Reflection on the Virgin Mary," in *L'immagine teologica di Maria, oggi*, 346; J. Rajah, "Mary and the Marginalized," *Vidyajyoti* 51/5 (May 1987): 214-229, esp. 218, 229. Helpful in tracing theological developments are the documents of the FABC's Office of Evangelization, see, e.g., M. Saturnino (ed.), *Rooting Faith in Asia: Source Book for Inculturation* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 2005), 60ff.

⁴¹² See S. Murcott, *Bouddha et les femmes. Les premières femmes bouddhistes d'après le Therigatha* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1997).

It is likewise important to cast a glance at African and Indian christologies. In Africa, we distinguish between Christology of inculturation and Christology of liberation.⁴¹³ The Christology of inculturation is inspired on the one hand by the theory of the anonymous Christian and the hidden presence of Christ, and, on the other hand, by representations of Christ as ancestor (or proto-ancestor), chief or elder, master of initiation or healer. The Christologies of liberation that we find, especially in South Africa and in sub-Saharan countries, are frequently of Latin American inspiration or are modeled on USA black theology. Their point of departure is the situation of misery and injustice experienced in a number of African countries. Here, the historic figure of Christ has a certain importance because it marks the break with the political and economic *status quo* and with past religious colonization. In neither of these cases, inculturation or liberation, is virginity discussed. Christological discourse is centered on an adult Christ or sometimes on an ideological one.⁴¹⁴

The same is true for neo-Hindu Christologies which do not discuss the conception and birth of Jesus from the virgin mother and the direct intervention of God-Spirit. Apart from the *social Christ* of Ghandi and that of Radhakrishna, for whom God is not born once in time but emerges progressively from the womb of humanity, neo-Hindu Christology sees the figure of the Savior as a spiritual reality or realization.⁴¹⁵

Another important area of theological inculturation deals with the feminine/feminist theology of the countries of Asia and Latin America. The topic of virginity is not much in evidence. This is the case, for example, with the "mujerista theology"⁴¹⁶ that considers itself as a theology by and for the Latin

⁴¹³ Ntima Kanza, "Non. Je ne mourrai pas, je vivrai." *Méditation sur le cheminement christologique en Afrique* ([Kinshasha]: Ed. Loyola, 1996), 94-95.

⁴¹⁴ See, e.g., Volker Küster, *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ: Intercultural Christology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 134.

⁴¹⁵ See J. Dupuis, *Jésus-Christ à la rencontre des religions*, Coll. "Jésus et Jésus-Christ," 39 (Paris: Desclée, 1989), 63.

⁴¹⁶ See Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

American woman. The image of Mary in these accounts of feminine experience remains vague and generic. It is constructed and deconstructed according to mainly social needs. Similar observations can be made about some recent Asian feminist studies.⁴¹⁷

Reflection on virginity is mainly confined to the exegetical domain without sufficiently taking into account the rapport between exegesis and theology.⁴¹⁸ What is stressed is the Christological significance. "The virginal conception of Jesus is a statement about Jesus, not about Mary."⁴¹⁹ A socially committed feminism, such as is expressed in the declaration of the Conference at Singapore in 1987, sees virginity above all as sexual oppression: "This doctrine and its interpretation come from the fear that men have with respect to feminine sexuality, and it has baneful effects on women." In spite of massive rejection, virginity presents a positive note in that it excludes man from the event of the Incarnation and thereby announces the end of patriarchy.⁴²⁰ Perpetual virginity, by proposing an impossible ideal to women and an absurd ideal of family life to all believers, is at the origin of a sexual neurosis among Catholics.⁴²¹ Mary, the prime example of virginity, thus becomes "the domestic symbol" of what she is not, namely, what men would like her to be permanently and simultaneously: daughter, mother and spouse forever!⁴²² For Chung Hyun Kyung, who presents a positive reading on the virginity of Mary, the latter is not only a

⁴¹⁷ Grace Ji-Sun Kim, *The Grace of Sophia: A Korean North American Women's Christology* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2002), 129 ff. The author, embracing "feminine wisdom tradition," abstracts from any discussion on virginity.

⁴¹⁸ See Kathleen Coyle, *Mary in the Christian Tradition* (Quezon, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1993), 26.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid.

⁴²⁰ Summary statement on Feminist Mariology, in *Feminist Theology from the Third World*, ed. U. King (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996²), 271-272.

⁴²¹ Ibid.

⁴²² M. Katoppo, "The Concept of God and the Spirit from a Feminist Perspective," in *Feminist Theology from the Third World*, 248.

model of femininity fulfilled but also a model of woman fully liberated, for "as a virgin, she is a self-defining woman."⁴²³

Asian women are looking for new and liberating images of Mary. Virginity is seen as a reality to be shed or transcended so as to discover in Mary a catalyst of liberation.⁴²⁴ For K. Coyle, new images of virginity will express creative independence (Eric Neumann), a holiness that sets one apart for God (like the virginity of Israel), and a hope for dignity and personal identity in the midst of poverty and injustice.⁴²⁵ As it is easy to see, such images of virginity are largely cultural. They are often juxtaposed, sometimes pitted against each other, and at times contradict each other.

A more solid theological approach is given by I. Gebara and M. C. Bingemer.⁴²⁶ The anthropological point of view of this Latin American contribution, a feminine view and one from the Third World, connects also with pastoral concerns. Here, virginity is a sign that ought not to be evaluated in and of itself only, because it refers to something greater than itself.⁴²⁷ But virginity is not only a sign of the sovereignty of God. It also reflects the mystery of woman understood as ontological openness. The human person is destined to transcend him- or herself; thus, in the Virgin Mary the Spirit finds a permanent space where he may dwell. Speaking more practically, virginity is the condition and beginning of a new people. It is a source and means to serve the poor.

We note then that the subject of Mary's virginity is not of prime importance for inculturation. Furthermore, the respective cultures are not spontaneously responsive to the values of virginity (conception and birth) and especially to that of

⁴²³ "Who is Mary for Today's Asian Woman?" in *Feminist Theology from the Third World*, 269.

⁴²⁴ E. Tamez, "Women's Rereading of the Bible," in *Feminist Theology from the Third World*, 208.

⁴²⁵ *Mary in the Christian Tradition*, 30-31.

⁴²⁶ I. Gebara and M. C. Bingemer, *Mary, Mother of God, Mother of the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987).

⁴²⁷ *Ibid.*, 10-31.

perpetual virginity. Finally, the models adopted to promote liberation and inculturation are often imported from Europe and North America and in general do not present pronounced sympathies for the notion of virginity. The primary meaning of virginity risks being lost. On the other hand, the so-called secondary meanings (autonomy, consciousness of the self) not only facilitate inculturation but they can likewise help to deepen the primary significance of virginity and widen its hermeneutic significance.

B. Kerygma as Imperative Present

The publications on virginity of recent years—mostly as part of a greater ensemble—translate a sense of urgency and affirmation. The imperative of the present has led to a new consciousness of witnessing to the Catholic heritage. As mentioned earlier, these efforts express the double intent of retrieval and exposition, the latter marked sometimes by recent developments and reassessments of the theme.

Of course, there will always be the critical and somewhat discordant voice to keep theology “honest and on its toes.”⁴²⁸ If earlier encyclopedias or dictionaries could lead to confusion about Mary’s virginity,⁴²⁹ the more recent publications avoid ambiguity for the sake of modernity and ecumenical irenism. Aware of the fact that we “live in a historicist, rationalist culture, which tends to equate truth with factual truth,”⁴³⁰ the recourse to perennial tradition in more recent assessments

⁴²⁸ See, e.g., L. Cunningham, “The Virgin Mary,” in *From Trent to Vatican II: Historical and Theological Investigations*, ed. R. F. Bulman and E. J. Parrella (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 190. Negative reactions to theology and Mary’s virginity in some cases reflect psychological aversion against the Church: see B. Dressler et al., eds., *Religion—Leben, Lernen, Leben. Ansichten zur “Religion” bei ReligionslehrerInnen* (Münster: Lit-Verlag, 2004), 132.

⁴²⁹ See, e.g., *Théo. Nouvelle Encyclopédie Catholique* (Paris: Droguet-Arden/Fayard, 1989), 682; Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1994), 1117. In both cases, hovering ambiguity may and does lead to erroneous conclusions!

⁴³⁰ F. J. van Beeck, “Born of the Virgin Mary: Towards a *Sprachregelung* on a Delicate Point of Doctrine,” *Pacifica: Australian Theological Studies* 14 (2001): 142.

takes on renewed importance.⁴³¹ The most recent mariological dictionary⁴³² assessing the recent history of our topic (1832-1960, 1960-1980, 1980-2006) confirms this trend, defining the various facets of Mary's virginity "una dottrina stabile e accertata."⁴³³ Highlighting the recent exegetical appeasement, it specifies the need to recover the sense of mystery of virginity which is to be placed among the *mysteria kraugés*, "misteri da proclamare altamente." Admitting that there is no "scientific proof" of this mystery, virginity remains a "testimonianza di credenti" that even contemporary Christians can assent to in the Spirit.⁴³⁴

One of the characteristic features of contemporary mariology is the return to "manualistic mariology," or, in more contemporary terms, the return to a mariological synthesis. Synthesis, the call for synthesis, is still another feature of what we termed a need for retrieval and comprehensiveness. It is in some of these recent mariologies that we find the most exhaustive and comprehensive information on Mary's virginity. This does not mean that earlier periods were unaware of the need for an overview of what happens in mariology. Important names that marked the 1980s and 1990s are W. Beinert, A. Ziegenaus, J. A. Nicolas, and J. Auer. There we have the beginning of a more explicit reference to the theological reading of virginity, for example, when Courth presents perpetual virginity as permanent involvement in the service of Christ, and Ziegenaus sees it as radical service allowing Mary to progressively become disciple of Christ and future mother of the Church.⁴³⁵ For J.-H. Nicolas Mary's virginity has its place in the context of her holiness as mother of Christ. Seen in

⁴³¹ See the Pontifical International Marian Academy, *The Mother of the Lord: Memory, Presence, Hope* ("Presenting a Review of the Actual Questions Facing Mariology Today"), trans. T.A. Thompson (Staten Island, NY: St. Paul, 2007).

⁴³² Stefano De Fiores, *Maria. Nuovissimo Dizionario* (3 vols., Bologna: EDB, 2006), 2:1771ff.

⁴³³ *Ibid.*, 1802.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴³⁵ See Courth, in *Lexikon der Katholischen Dogmatik*, ed. W. Beinert (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1987), 356; Ziegenaus, in *Marienlexikon*, 3:479.

Thomistic perspective, virginity is recognized as the “ontological base without which the mystery would be no more than the mental construct of a religious intention.”⁴³⁶ Auer, in the second part of tome four of his Catholic dogmatic, chooses a theological approach centered on the person of Mary and her place in the work of salvation. According to this theological orientation, Mary’s virginity is considered an “essential foundation” for the whole of salvation history.⁴³⁷

The transition to the present period was initiated in 1998 by A. Ziegenaus in *Maria in der Heilsgeschichte*.⁴³⁸ Mary’s virginity is examined from three different and complementary vantage points: from a Christological and ecclesiological viewpoint, both rooted in salvation history. Thus, virginity receives a full-fledged contemporary theological treatment culminating in Mary’s role as “archetype of the Church.” A pattern develops during these years leading from scriptural foundations to theological developments, the latter becoming more expansive and inventive.⁴³⁹ Piacentini will highlight Mary’s virginity in light of her Immaculate Conception,⁴⁴⁰ and Malnati from the perspective of faith.⁴⁴¹ If Cerbelaud allows himself to offer a somewhat historical-critical *parcours*,⁴⁴² Coggi will opt for a more traditional retrieval and affirmation of Mary’s virginity.⁴⁴³ And this seems to be the tenor of the present, advocating magisterial authority and classical (not least pre-conciliar) theology. Paul Haffner, in an attempt to convey a “realist perspective” of

⁴³⁶ J.-H. Nicolas, *Synthèse dogmatique. De la Trinité à la Trinité* (Fribourg, Switzerland: Éd. Universitaires/Paris: Éd. Beauchesne, 1986), 483.

⁴³⁷ J. Auer, *Kleine Katholische Dogmatik*, 4/2: *Jesus Christus—Heiland der Welt* (Regensburg: Verlag Pustet, 1988), 390–487, 442.

⁴³⁸ *Mariologie*, 232–287.

⁴³⁹ See, e.g., J. C. Rey García Paredes, *Maria nella comunità del Regno. Sintesi di mariologia* (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997).

⁴⁴⁰ E. Piacentini, *Nuovo corso sistematico di mariologia sub luce Immaculatae* (Rome: Casa Editrice Frascati, 2002), 106–108.

⁴⁴¹ E. Malnati, *Maria nella fede della Chiesa* (Casale Monferrato: Piemme, 2001), 77.

⁴⁴² D. Cerbelaud, *Marie, un parcours dogmatique* (Paris: Cerf, 2003), 47–68.

⁴⁴³ R. Coggi, *La Beata Vergine. Trattato di mariologia* (Bologna: ESD, 2004), 137–157.

Mary's virginity, will engage in a painstaking and very physical description following Merkelbach.⁴⁴⁴ This detailed information reflects the obligation a number of younger theologians experience to speak the truth in a way which will not allow for ambiguity, compromise or confusion. As mentioned by A. Calkins in *Mariology*: "Inaccurate teaching about Our Lady's virginity will have deleterious effects on the doctrine about Christ and the Church, whose model is Our Lady."⁴⁴⁵ The truth, nothing but the full truth, will exorcise the demons of yesterday.

A similar tendency can be noted in more popular but not lesser treatises about Catholicism and/or Mary; that is, for example, from the *Essential Catholic Handbook*⁴⁴⁶ and *All Generations Will Call Me Blessed*⁴⁴⁷ to Scaperlanda⁴⁴⁸ and Terrence J. McNally.⁴⁴⁹ The very matter-of-fact presentation by McNally may lack the pedagogical flourish of Scaperlanda's *Idiot's Guide*, but both of these lay theologians gratify the reader with a comprehensive treatment of the dogma of Mary's virginity. The attempt at a faithful and comprehensive presentation of Mary's virginity does not have to be boring, as Jon M. Sweeney suggests: "If Mary's virginity was life-giving and fruitful, wild and unsubdued, her spirit becomes all the more appealing for us today, and her wisdom all the more penetrating, as well."⁴⁵⁰ The trend sketched in these lines finds a corroborating

⁴⁴⁴ P. Haffner, *The Mystery of Mary* (Leominster, Herefordshire: Gracewing, 2004), 135. He excludes all damage or violation of generative organs, and all experience of venereal pleasure.

⁴⁴⁵ A. B. Calkins, "Our Lady's Perpetual Virginity," in *Mariology: A Guide for Priests, Deacons, Seminarians, and Consecrated Persons* (Goleta, CA: Seat of Wisdom Books, A Division of Queenship Publishing, 2008), 313.

⁴⁴⁶ Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1997.

⁴⁴⁷ Jim McManus (New York: Crossroad Publ. Co., 1999), 68-74.

⁴⁴⁸ Maria Ruiz Scaperlanda, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Mary of Nazareth* (New York: Alpha Books, 2006), 37-41.

⁴⁴⁹ *What Every Catholic Should Know about Mary: Dogmas, Doctrines, and Devotions*. (n.p.): Xlibris Corp., 2009), 90-101.

⁴⁵⁰ Jon M. Sweeney, *Strange Heaven: The Virgin Mary as Woman, Mother, Disciple, and Advocate* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2006), 30.

pendant in recent catechetical works, especially commentaries and compendia to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.⁴⁵¹

In all of this an important question remains: how is Mary's virginity taught; how is it received? We are entering here a domain reserved to teaching and transmission of this reality of our faith, of personal openness and receptiveness. The complex theme of virginity is a pastoral challenge. Is it possible to turn it into a spiritual source for the life of faith? The answer to this second question will depend much on a correct and positive pastoral presentation.

Here are some conditions to be fulfilled in order to attain this end. First of all, there is need for an intellectual honesty that recognizes the difficulties and the limits of our knowledge about this question. There is needed a complete presentation, taking account of what is given in Scripture and Tradition, acknowledging the role of the Church in interpretation and transmission. It is also necessary to have regard for the psycho-cultural context of those being instructed and, indeed, the final end of the teaching, which is not something purely intellectual but of an existential order, that is, a progress in faith.

⁴⁵¹ See, e.g., the USCCB's *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* (Washington, DC, 2006), 141-149; or the USCCB *Compendium: Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Washington, DC, 2006), arts. 95-103; James Socias, *Introduction to Catholicism: A Complete Course* (Chicago: Midwest Theological Forum, 2007), no. 71.